

Richard Kern

Press Kit

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REVIEWS

Modern Painters

October 2008
Feature Inc.
September 2008

"Richard Kern" at Feature, Inc., New York

October 2 – November 1, 2008

Several of Richard Kern's recent photographs are titled after the cut-rate retailers where he purchases the panties he gets his models to pose in: H & M, Target, etc. Tacking the used underwear to the wall just below their photographic representations, the artist simultaneously distances and brings us close to this certain object of desire. In a recent Q & A, Kern postulates that "art collectors, memorabilia collectors and party-collecting perverts all share a similar desire to own something that has been by a specific person."

Tongue wagging, the artist attempts to prove this point, presenting us with numerous photographs literally accompanied by used skivvies, and others that expose us to a highly invasive view that can only be touched with the eyes. In *Upskirts (2008)*, Kern places twenty photographs in a grid, each shot from the ground looking directly up the folds of a young woman's skirt. Concentrating on nothing but the thighs and the graphic patterns of the threadbare panties between them – polka dots, plaids, stripes, and hearts (synthetic and cotton) – the artist teases with the tantalizing proximity of his lens, repeatedly staging scenes of unobstructed voyeurism that use the allure of a sexual fetish to eclipse and/or undermine his artistry.

In *Divided Beauty (H & M) (2008)*, Kern places flesh-colored boy shorts and a bralette between two color prints of different models sporting the ensemble. The double portrait blatantly borrows from the pornographic genre. But is it pornography? This two-for-one erotic configuration hints at a certain packaged anonymity, suggesting that anyone can easily slip in and out of the generic pose as well as the mass-market undies that seem to be there for the taking.

- Piper Marshall

"Richard Kern" originally appeared in the December 2008 / January 2009 issue of Modern Painters.

ArtReview

Richard Kern

Late September
Feature Inc., New York
www.featureinc.com

Eye candy for the hetero male gaze has been splashed all over art from time immemorial, evidenced in recent years by John Currin's porn paintings or Richard Prince's banes on car bonnets. In the case of photographer Richard Kern we are offered something more direct: through -which co contemplate pornography's wide embrace: he has done editorial work for" top—Shelf titles like *Juggs* while creating arty-porny series of up-skirt shots and, in what now seems a predictable career move, shoots for high-end fashion magazines such as *Purple*, all of which have been displayed in galleries. One such series is to be shown at New York's Feature Inc. this month: playing (typically) on Peeping Tom fantasies, it 'catches' young women crouched in bushes, panties down, seemingly in the act of relieving themselves. Less arousing than numbly familiar from the standard visual language of youth-oriented fashion-brand campaigns, such images provide ample food for thought, bolstering what Roland Barthes famously observed: that sex is everywhere in America, except in sex.

- Skye Sherwin

From ArtReview October 2008

Artforum

January 2005

Feature, Inc.

23 October – 11 December, 2004

Before becoming known as a photographer, Richard Kern was a director of short death-punk films, pioneering a post-Warholian B-porn aesthetic that made itself at home on Sonic Youth album covers and in East Village basement screening rooms at a time when it was still possible to call such culture “underground.” In the meantime, Kern’s photographs have been published in magazines as various as *Purple* and *Barely Legal*. Kern does porn, art, and also fashion photography, sometimes all in one shooting day, but it’s not in this cross-over potential that the singularity of Kern’s work resides, it’s in the way he strips this multi-tasking down to its hollow core and in how he elaborates his peculiar distance from the labor he performs whenever he picks up a camera and aims it at a posing model.

The nine photographs on view at Feature Inc. all play on pornographic tropes of voyeurism. Kern’s lens peeps through windows and half-open doors to capture glimpses up his models’ skirts or down their blouses, locating panties or nipples. Blurry foreground elements such as doorknobs, potted plants and window glare eroticize the simultaneous proximity and remoteness of the unseen photographer. It’s hard to say whether Kern is referencing “amateur teen” and “up-skirt” porn genres, or if these images were actually taken on the job. I prefer to think that we are looking at up-skirt porn that is referencing itself, that Kern and his female models are conspiring to open up a pose within the pose, cheating an off-the-clock art moment on the porn clock. This new pose and the gaze it plays for may not look immediately different from those of pornography, and the model, photographer, and décor are all the same, but the singularity of the chosen, agreed upon moment seems to tear itself away from its initial context, reterritorializing itself here, in a picture like *Woman undresses (Chicago)*, 2004. These are stolen moments, captured on negatives the artist chose not to turn over to his editor.

Unlike Terry Richardson, whose work seems fully invested in the dream of making commercial fashion transgressive, or transgression fashionable, Kern doesn’t pretend that image culture is a non-stop party. And unlike Ryan McGinley, who’s photographs seem to document a dream of youth freely exposing itself in moments as innocent as nature, Kern exposes the economics and the artifice of every situation. They make work seem like play, whereas Kern plays at working. The crucial difference, and it’s always sensible in his strangely uptight images, is that a Kern moment is aware of its own non-belonging as either play or work time. In *Office (NYC)*, a model posing as an office

worker seemingly caught unaware as she squats to retrieve a fallen document, conspires with Kern to re-appropriate the pornographic situation, coolly reproducing it in an image that is closer to the sensibility of Pierre Klossowski than the snapshot neo-realism of wild boy lifestyle photography.

We see nothing, really, in Up Skirt 1 but the lavender dead end of the model's panties. We see an image not bothering to break the rules of the genre its title so straightforwardly names, and a hobbyist's attention to form and detail. We see Kern showing himself seeing not much, and his model agreeing to show it. A Kern image seems to start from the boredom of looking at a world already photographed in advance, then finds its discrete distance from this boredom and this world. Kern captures nothing but some young, blank flesh, a moment slipped into panties and carefully, soberly returned to its own opacity. There is no simulated joy in this moment, only the joy of simulating it.

- John Kelsey

NY Times

**New York Times
November 5, 2004
ART IN REVIEW
Richard Kern and Lily van der Stokker
By THE NEW YORK TIMES**

**Richard Kern / Lily van der Stokker
Feature Inc.
530 West 25th Street, Chelsea
Through Dec. 11**

These two separate solo shows could be presented under a single title, "Innocence and Experience." While Richard Kern's erotically raw pictures of women border on pornography, Lily van der Stokker's wall paintings project a childlike sweetness.

Though they look as if they were taken by a roving voyeur, Mr. Kern's medium-size, snapshot-style color photographs are staged, using attractive young female models. Subjects include a view up a standing woman's short skirt; a fully dressed woman on a park bench exposing a breast as she bends to adjust a shoe; and a pregnant woman smoking on a back porch wearing nothing but bikini bottoms.

These photographs may strike some people as sexist and others as sexy. Either way they are uncommonly visceral instances of the so-called male gaze.

With their finely coordinated pastel colors, blobby shapes, cartoon flowers, doodle-like lines and cheery words, Ms. van der Stokker's works look like nursery murals. One, consisting mainly of a big amorphous pink shape with a three-dimensional set of painted steps attached where it meets the floor, has a speech bubble announcing, "I am an artwork and I am 3 years old." Another, titled "Old Kind of Good Advice (Happy Childhood)," praises "parents that give children goals that are achievable."

This may sound dopey, but the slyly quirky faux-innocence Ms. van der Stokker has been practicing for more than 10 years is still genuinely charming, both visually and poetically.

KEN JOHNSON

We know the photos of Richard Kern (born 1954) well, obviously because they've been regularly shown at the Jousse gallery, but especially because of his books, *New York Girls* and *Model Release*, both published by Taschen. Yet this artist has never had a major exhibition in France before. Now-that's been rectified with this retrospective organized by the magazine *Uovo* (1) and Jerome Sans. Does this mean that the Palais de Tokyo is finally adopting a new orientation? It's already being bruited about that there doesn't seem to be much difference between these pictures and what [makes] an image interesting. For that they need "good reasons," like modernism, for example. OK, let's find some good reasons. How about composition? How can you not notice the originality of this picture of a young woman with her legs spread wide reduced to a head sitting on a crotch by the angle it was shot from? Or content: how can you not be moved by these young women with a lost look in their eyes, their anxiety reaching its heights with a brunette who's pressing a steak against an eye we're sure is swollen? In the skin flicks nothing is ever out of place; the whole thing is based on an illusion of perfection. There's almost always some disturbing detail in Kern's photos: a girl brushing her teeth, another flossing the first girl's teeth and a third, in a very explicit gesture, doing a deep throat with a gun barrel. But what most makes these photos different from the classical magazine pics is once again the question of desire. The lad mag photos are not really, sexy at all because they always cling entirely to corny stereo types and never deviate an inch from them, just like icon painters. Kern's photos, like those of Roy Stuart (see art press no. 303) radiate sensuality, overflow with a primitive, animal sexual energy, precisely because they were made by an artist (and not a "porno bureaucrat") who infuses his photos with his fantasies or at least makes us believe he does. Apparently Kern has a thing for open-crotch pantyhose.

Along with the photos you could also see the films the artist made in New York during the 1980s, when he shot the edgiest underground stars of that time, such as Nick Zedd and Lydia Lunch. The footage is funny and well served by remarkable soundtracks by Sonic Youth and Killdozer. Describing these shorts where sex gets mixed with the goriest grand guignol, Kern has written, "For me, making these movies is like dropping a great big smelly turd in the middle of the street, standing back and watching the people marvel at it." One of the most memorable is *My Nightmare*, in which he shows himself lying in bed masturbating while thinking of a model (played by Susan McNamara) with whom he indulges in wild erotic games. As soon as he ejaculates (back to reality!), he quickly wipes his hands on his pants and opens the door to greet the young woman of his fantasies. But things don't go as planned at all. The minute he

gropes her behind as she poses for a photo, she slaps him and angrily ends it, storming out the door. Is *My Nightmare* an excellent metaphor for the relationship between the photographer and his model and the fantasies most people imagine going on at porno shoots? Whatever. Kern has chosen just the right profession.

Richard Leydier Translation, L-S Torgoff

(1) In its eighth issue the magazine *Uovo* publishes an interview with Kern along with a special section of his most recent photos.

NY Arts

NY Arts Summer 2001

Richard Kern Gets (Other People) Naked by Randy D. Gladman

On a recent Saturday afternoon, I found myself standing in front of a series of framed photographs by Richard Kern, writing in my journal notes that seemed more like Penthouse letters than art criticism. "Staring wantonly into the camera lens, Lucy slides her delicate hand into her bikini bottom, daring the viewer to come to her with a glance impregnated with innocence and desire... Now taking a soothing post-coital haul from her Marlboro, the buxom blonde opens her legs to reveal the used condom still protruding from her vagina and the mess her unseen lover has left inside her legs." "Oh my God," I hear gasped behind me. A middle-aged woman had just entered the gallery, looking as small-town as Shelly Long in an infomercial, obviously not aware of what she was about to encounter. I didn't hear the rest of the brief discussion she had with her companion in front of the works, their whispers barely resounding in the small empty room. Embarrassed, they quickly scurried away, clearly fearing for their morality and their souls, but only after glancing at each work with temperate shocked disbelief.

Richard Kern's models pose before his lens in manners most people only ever experience with their most intimate partners. Tucked safely into the backroom of Feature Inc., his newest offering of color photographs achieves the same transcendence of pornography and sensuality expected from this small-town Baptist boy. Treading in the shallow underground waters that flow periodically between art and porn, Kern's images carry the feeling of privacy and intimacy you normally draw only from those home movies or Polaroid/digital pictures of your past sexual partners you keep locked away in a dusty box, somewhere hidden from your current lover. Standing before the beautiful works, a feeling of invasion of someone else's private life smacks of embarrassment. I was reminded of an ugly college party I passed through years ago, watching a fifth generation, grainy copy of the infamous Pamela Anderson/Tommy Lee video. This was a record, albeit pornographic, of a couple in love, a personal memory of their vacation time together. It was never intended to be viewed by anyone other than the two stars/camera operators, and made me feel dirty and wrong watching it with a roomful of howling my stomach turned with the uncomfortable realization that I was a pervert again, voyeuristically peeking into the private lives of total strangers. And yes, enjoying it.

But unlike unfortunate Pam and Tommy who (apparently) didn't know at the time of filming that they would be the coming attraction to VCR near you, these models knew what they were doing, and appear to be relishing the very exhibitionism of the medium. The artist has hired these women, not simply subjected them to a post-coital photo session, and posed them knowingly and purposefully.

These situations are created, not caught.

Digital photography, with its ease of use and lack of laboratory developing, brought private photography to the masses in a scale the Polaroid never achieved, and created home pornographers out of all of us. No longer fearing that Billy the camera geek at the local drugstore foto-mat would file through your snapshots, home pornography has become a viable and favorite pastime for new lovers and anniversaried pairs trying new spices. (You know what I am talking about, don't you?) Although Kern's works are not digitally manipulated in any way, the actors they depict have the comfort level of trusting lovers and resemble the intimate moments captured for private consumption made possible by home digital photography. Yet, these girls have accepted the artist's camera and perform before it, decidedly challenging the viewers to stare, contorting their bodies and divulging their secrets, clearly aware of the shock value of their revealing openness. Natasha Merritt has taken this performative aspect to a more personal level in her Taschen publication *Digital Diaries* (2000), by placing herself before her camera, laying bare her own, very real sex life with the same shocking earnestness as Kern's actors. Kern, however, has been at this project for many years, and Merritt's images, while more beautiful aesthetically, are clearly derivative of Kern's ability to elevate pornography to a personal level of art while at the same time soiling the pictures with enough dirt to render their scopophilic pleasure absolute.

NY Post

The New York Post May 17, 2001 Beauty's in the Lens...of Photographer Richard Kern, Who Loves New York Girls by James Gardner

Richard Kern is hardly a household name, but in pockets of Paris, San Francisco and Berlin, his fame as a photographer surpasses even Robert Mapplethorpe's.

He is most famous in the East Village, where he has lived and worked since the '80s, capturing on film the neighborhood's air of menacing and slightly baroque decrepitude.

The 46-year-old Kern accomplished this not by photographing crumbling row houses but a species of "New York Girls" in a 1995 book of that name.

Now the prestigious German Taschen books has brought out "Model Release," a sequel to Kern's underground best seller. Several dozen of the images in the book, mostly nudes, go on view this evening at the Feature Inc. gallery in Chelsea.

Challenging every norm of beauty and even pornography, Kern's New York Girls are scruffy, disabused and cynically impertinent. Typically, they study at Parsons or the New School, read Foucault and Bukowski, listen to techno and shave only when they feel like it.

Like many quintessential New Yorkers, Kern comes from somewhere else, specifically, Rocky Mount, S.C.

Kern - who seems to cultivate the look of a clean-shaven, if slightly gangly, adolescent fresh from the sticks - is the product of a solid Baptist upbringing. He comes across as scrupulously polite and respectful. To this day, his mother isn't exactly sure what he does in New York.

Kern had his epiphany one day while cutting class in 10th grade. "I was hitchhiking to a mall 30 miles away when this beat-up old car full of young N.Y.C. glam girls stopped for me. They had weird haircuts, vinyl hot pants and platform shoes. I sat there in the back seat with my mouth hanging open, like the hick I was."

As soon as he could, Kern headed for New York. But it was years before he began photographing his girls.

He made a name for himself as a pioneer of the "cinema of transgression." These short little movies parody film noir, with titles such as "The Evil Cameraman," "You Killed Me First" and "Submit to Me Now." Kern associates them with a darker period of his life, when he was hooked on heroin. He made some influential videos of groups like Marilyn Manson and Sonic Youth before abandoning

film altogether.

Kern, who has a fine arts degree, sells his portraits for \$900 to \$2,300. He also peddles some of them to pornographic magazines, including Barely Legal, Finally Legal, Tight and Taboo.

As pornography goes, his subjects are not to everyone's taste - there are no implants, no big hair. One unglamorous young woman brushes her teeth, another flosses, a third stands stupidly with her finger in her nose. There's a moral element to Kern's work. The overwhelming message seems to be that freedom is good, whether it's the freedom of a photographer to expose his obsessions, of a sitter to expose her body or of viewers to indulge their fantasies.

This is the freedom those women in hot pants incarnated for Kern all those years ago. For the kids of small-town America, it's the freedom that has always made New York the center of their desires and the most amazing place in the world.

INTERVIEWS

Interview

Kernel of Truth

By Emma Reeves
06/05/2009

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 than 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!

Rental Gallery is located at 165 East Broadway, 6th Floor, New York.

Vice Magazine

FINALLY LEGAL RICHARD KERN TAKES IT OFF

From: "The Vice Photo Book," 2007

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.

INTERVIEW BY JESSE PEARSON

"SOFT"

Matthew Higgs

Richard Kern in conversation with Matthew Higgs: New York 2004.

Introduction

Richard Kern, photographer, occasional pornographer, former-filmmaker and video director, and a man once amicably referred to as the 'Evil Cameraman', remains, first and foremost, a portrait artist. For more than two decades Kern has - with a shifting band of accomplices that, over the years, has included post-punk diva Lydia Lunch, artists such as David Wojnarowicz, Karen Finley, Rita Ackermann and Lucy McKenzie, the novelist Geoff Nicholson, and musicians such as Sonic Youth, the Butthole Surfers and Marilyn Manson - sought to both unravel and illuminate the complex and often darker sides of human nature.

Unlike self-portraiture - which through its peculiar mixture of narcissism, self-absorption, and self-conscious lack of objectivity, often takes the form of a kind of egotistical public self-analysis, portraits of other people tend to depict a more objective record of the social (and emotional) entanglements that exist between two or more individuals. (1) The San Francisco-based writer Kevin Killian has identified the portrait's embrace of this entanglement as a "social contract." (2) Killian's "social contract" echoes art historian Richard Brilliant's assertion - in his important 1991 study *Portraiture* - that portraits embody a "representation of the structuring of human relationships". (3) Both Brilliant and Killian's notions reverberate in a recent article by the British writer Dan Fox, who suggested that all art ultimately "deals with our individual relationships to each other and to the world. No matter how deep the terms of discussion are couched in abstruse philosophies or socio-political histories, a lot boils down to economies of exchange: the fundamentals of how we see each other, how our bodies coexist with one another and the objects around us." (4) Fox could well have been thinking about portraiture, and more specifically about the work of Richard Kern, where the degree of intimacy brokered between author and subject - and the tensions such intimacy provokes - might be considered to be the true subject of his work.

Portraits make evident the intimate social dramas between two (or more) individuals: they make public the often private (or privileged) interactions, relationships and "economies of exchange" that typically exist beyond or outside public

scrutiny. Kern himself has described photography as a "way to get into intimate situations with other people." (5) Portraits are essentially a collaborative act: evidence of an agreement between artist and subject of the respective desires to portray and be portrayed. Richard Kern's photographs - typically, although not exclusively, of young women - play off the artist's admitted voyeurism against his model's evident exhibitionism. Conflating two forms of desire - one fundamentally private (voyeurism), the other essentially public (exhibitionism) - which are played out before the camera's lens, Kern's resulting photographs are highly self-conscious, and clearly intended for public view.

Kern's portraits would appear to have emerged from an investigation into the classic (male) artist - (female) muse relationships, such as that which existed between Man Ray and Lee Miller. In their shared, participatory role within the construction of these images, Kern and his (typically) female models foreground the degree of complicity that exists in the production of such images. The Scottish artist, and occasional Kern model, Lucy McKenzie has said of her experience modeling for Kern: "Now I realize how much participation [there] is in pornography, and a woman's consent to be objectified is a manifestation of the overall willingness and need for intellectual life to transgress. Transgression is not always a negative action and in thinking about and making art it is clear that the examination of the very private, personal and sometimes squirmingly embarrassing can be a fundamental element." (6)

What power relationships, or "economies of exchange", exist in Kern's images are consequently far murkier than we might initially imagine (a scenario that is further complicated by the subjective relationships we - as viewers - bring to such images.) In her introduction to Kern's book *Model Release*, McKenzie articulated her own relationship with portraiture's complicit nature: "In Richard's work I can see his refined understanding of power relationships. His subject matter is so very narrow and obsessive that this really surfaces. On a personal level, I enjoyed the very cardboard cut-out roles that are present within this kind of situation, men versus women. [...] Any tension thrown into play by basic sexuality involved in a photo shoot was diffused by the cartoonish power roles we fitted into ... there was a clear, understated understanding that neither photographer nor model was impressed by the predetermined power structure that exists for this kind of encounter between men and women, artist and model." (7)

Despite their apparent 'naturalism' - often evoked through his use of domestic or, more recently, 'pastoral' outdoor settings - Kern's photographs are, in the artist's words, "fakes." Kern has stated that significant part of photography's appeal is "... the fact that you are never really sure about what you are looking at." (8) This element of 'uncertainty' or 'artifice' was perhaps more pronounced in Kern's earlier photographs produced in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Invariably highly theatrical, Kern's images of this period were dramatically lit, staged tableaux that echoed the 1970s photographic work of artists such as Jimmy DeSana and Lucas Samaras (the latter of whose work Kern was exposed to as a student). Of course photography - by its very nature - presents us with only a partial, highly subjective take on reality: What is excised from an image is as crucial as that which remains. Photography, through its framing (and editing) of a situation invariably dramatizes and intensifies reality.

'Softer' than his previous work, inasmuch as the closed in, claustrophobic atmospheres and nihilistic impulses of his earlier work has been tempered, Kern's recent photographs evoke instead a somewhat soft-focus world view: one not dissimilar to that of the 1970s erotica of photographer David Hamilton. Kern himself has acknowledged that there has been "... a softening of the images," adding that they are no longer "... as blunt." (9) Kern's desire, to move away from the more aggressive repertoire of his earlier production has been provoked by his realization that, "There are a lot more ways to show perversion ... well not perversion exactly, maybe subversion ... than [simply] showing someone tied up." (10) In Soft Kern's embrace of the aesthetics and social, economic and libidinal ideologies of amateur pornography, and voyeuristic photography - genres that have grown exponentially with the availability of digital technology and access to the internet - is evident. These genres suggest - through their widespread proliferation - a democratization of the construction of sexualized identities: a process in which Kern himself has long been both a pivotal figure and subversive pioneer.

Footnotes

(1) Aspects of this text have been developed from my earlier essay "Likeness", in *Likeness: Portraits of Artist by Other Artists* (San Francisco, CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, 2004), 11.

(2) Kevin Killian, "Two Way Street" in *Likeness: Portraits of Artist by Other Artists* (San Francisco, CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, 2004), 28.

(3) Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (London, Reaktion Books Ltd., 1991), 9.

(4) Dan Fox, "A Song In My Heart", *Frieze* 79 (November-December 2003).

(5) Richard Kern in conversation with the author, 2004.

(6) Lucy McKenzie, in Richard Kern "Model Release" (Cologne, Taschen, 2000), 10.

(7) Lucy McKenzie, in Richard Kern "Model Release" (Cologne, Taschen, 2000), 10.

(8) Richard Kern in conversation with the author, 2004.

(9) Richard Kern in conversation with the author, 2004.

(10) Richard Kern in conversation with the author, 2004.

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MH: I believe your father was a photographer?

RK: Not exactly. My father was the managing editor of a daily local newspaper in North Carolina. He was someone who took photographs out of necessity: all the reporters doubled up as photographers, my father included. So calling him a photographer would be, I guess, a stretch. He would simply go on an assignment to cover a story and have to take some photographs whilst he was there. I grew up in a very dull paper-mill town in the South: a place with just one movie theatre, so my father being both a newspaper editor and occasional photographer seemed, at least to a child, like an exciting job.

MH: Did you accompany your father on his assignments?

RK: Yeah. He would take me along from time to time. I spent a lot of my childhood sitting around waiting for him to get finished whilst he was taking pictures of people at the local Moose Lodge. Occasionally there were a few interesting trips: like the time he took me to a drowning, or to car crashes, and the time we went to a Ku Klux Klan rally.

MH: How old would you have been?

RK: Around six or seven years old.

MH: Do you remember having any interest in photography as a child?

RK: When I was in Fifth Grade, as part of a science project, my father showed me how to make a pinhole camera. He showed

me how to load and process film, and how to take pictures. As a kid I always built model cars, which I was always winning trophies for! I would photograph scenes as if the models were racing down a road, except it was just a set up on the rug in my bedroom, so they weren't really that convincing, but when you are a kid it really looked like the real thing!

MH: Apart from model cars what were the things you gravitated towards in your youth?

RK: Back then there wasn't much television, maybe only three channels, so we weren't as saturated with images as we are now. I eventually got a job in the local cinema, 'the movies', that's what we called it. I was the 'marquee boy': I would change the marquee lettering every time a new movie was opening. In exchange I got free popcorn and got to see all the movies for free. I saw 'Barbarella' there, during which I had my first masturbatory experience: sitting in the balcony. That was the first occasion in which I experienced the idea of voyeurism with sexual release. I would have been really young. I just couldn't believe what I was seeing on the screen: a woman wiggling around and you could see through her clothes! That was unbelievable! The rest of my time was consumed by whatever happened to be on television. At the time James Bond movies were huge, so any movie that was remotely spy-like was shown and I distinctly remember seeing Andre Varda's 'Ashes and Diamonds' on television, being promoted in North Carolina as if it was a spy movie: only the hero of the film gets killed at the end, and the hero never normally died - so that would have been my first existential movie experience!

MH: 'Barbarella' aside, was pornography something that you were aware of?

RK: I can remember finding a copy of 'Playboy' magazine abandoned on the street: it was totally trashed, with all the pages glued together, but the fact that it had naked photographs of any type was exciting! I also had a paper route and I had this one customer who would never pay me: so one day I tried to figure out a different door to his house to knock on and accidentally walked into his garage where there were stacks of 'porno' magazines, that I had never seen before - I stole tons of them. He also had a 'porno' wife, who would occasionally come to the door dressed in a little negligee holding a martini glass. She was straight out of the 1950s. They never did pay me though!

MH: How did you end up gravitating towards college, and

eventually art school?

RK: I initially went to college to avoid the Draft. Vietnam was still going on. The Draft ended during the summer before I was due to go to college. To be honest I didn't really think a lot about art: although in High School I had an art teacher would occasionally show us interesting stuff. That would probably have been the first time I ever heard the word 'art': which certainly wasn't the focus of people's lives in North Carolina.

MH: What did you study at college?

RK: Art, philosophy, and politics. I was really into the idea of all the communist regimes and stuff like that, but I was pretty naive. I'm sure people who grew up and went to college in New York, for example, would have had way more information and knowledge before they actually got to college than I had when I eventually got out of college. My experience was completely different. In college I got opened up to art history and to ideas about what the world actually held.

MH: Did you imagine yourself becoming an artist?

RK: No. An art student maybe! At that time, at least when I started art school, I would have been the kind of art student who would have had a Matisse poster on my wall.

MH: And by the time you left art school?

RK: Probably nothing! I had an art professor, a really famous guy - at least he was famous to me - and someone told me that he had nothing hanging on the walls of his house. And I just couldn't believe that this famous art historian wouldn't have anything hanging on his walls! Donald Kuspit, that's who it was! He was my art history teacher in my final year of college. A couple of other interesting people came down to talk to us: Lucas Samaras came down, and for his talk he just sat there and wouldn't say anything. That was his talk!

MH: What was the reaction?

RK: It was just like 'This guy is really weird!' And Joseph Kosuth was the other one. It was around the time of the height of conceptual art which had become the big thing for me, and seeing and meeting those people had a huge impact.

MH: In what way? Because that is quite a strange group of

**people to have influenced what you subsequently did:
Although, that said, I can see the influence of Lucas
Samaras in your early photography.**

RK: I was really into Lucas Samaras. I just recently saw his retrospective and I was shocked about what I didn't realize about him at the time: the sheer isolation of that guy, and how he dealt with it, and I realized that in my own life I did pretty much that same thing at one period, but he did it his whole life. I interpreted his whole body of work as him saying: "I am alone, I am very lonely, I have nothing but myself, so I am going to take a fucking million pictures of myself!" But Donald Kuspit had the biggest impact on me. At that time Kuspit seemed to be saying: "The artist is nothing, the critic is all important" At the time that was a new idea to me: that the artist wouldn't exist without the critic.

MH: What kind of work were you making at that time?

RK: I went through every phase. I initially made metal sculpture: free-standing abstract sculpture like Anthony Caro. Then I moved on to neon sculpture, and made lots of outdoor work. Then I got involved with what I guess is called 'process work': I made tons of fake 'rocks' - I had gotten heavily into ceramics, and I would go out and plant these fake rocks all over the place, building sculptures in streams which would eventually get destroyed, and installing them in places where nobody would ever see them.

MH: When was this?

RK: In the mid 1970s.

MH: Were you aware of what was going on in New York at that time?

RK: Not really. I would go into the art library and see things in art books or art magazines. The only contact that I did have was with a magazine called 'Art-Rite' which I thought was really good.

MH: Do you mean that you knew the editors personally?

RK: No, no. I would just read it and I soon got the idea that everything that was interesting went on in New York.

MH: 'Art-Rite' was, in a way, the house journal of the early

to mid-1970s downtown New York art scene: where music, performance and visual art cultures were all mixing.

RK: To me 'Art-Rite' was more like a fanzine. I started making fanzines directly as a result of seeing 'Art-Rite'. I sent them a copy of my first fanzine and they ran an article about it, which to me was unbelievable.

MH: What was the nature of the fanzines?

RK: The very first one was called 'The Heroin Addict'!

MH: Anticipating your subsequent predilection for drugs?

RK: Yeah [Laughs]. I think at the time I must have thought that heroin must have been a truly glamorous lifestyle choice: an idea I had probably got from listening to Lou Reed over and over again. 'The Heroin Addict' turned into 'The Valium Addict', which eventually turned into 'Dumb Fucker'. 'The Heroin Addict' mostly had movie and music reviews, written by me and my friends, but the later fanzines evolved into people writing short stories, taking photos, and making drawings: it was like a hick arts magazine. I think everybody does fanzines for the same reasons, which is basically a way of saying: "This is what I think" or "Here is my take on it", but they were pretty novel at the time. I think there was only one other fanzine around, which was all music.

MH: Were taking photos at that time?

RK: Yeah, partly because you had to for your conceptual art projects. You had to document absolutely everything you ever did!

MH: What music were you listening to?

RK: The Stooges, The Velvet Underground, and then later the The Ramones. At that time you would go to a party with your Ramones record and put it on and the other people would want to kill you! That kind of reaction just doesn't seem possible now, but at the time it was for real.

MH: When did you move to New York?

RK: Around 1978, or 1979. I had an eight month lay-over in Philadelphia, where I continued putting out the fanzines. Which, when I think back on it, was a direct extension of what

my father was doing: he was basically doing a 'fanzine' for my home town - which is what a local newspaper was. When I eventually got to New York it was a whole different thing. I still made fanzines though: I would just leave them lying around everywhere, and people would just stumble across them. The only contact information was a PO Box number.

MH: Did you know anyone when you arrived in New York?

RK: I knew a couple of people from school, and some guy called Montana Houston who had written me a fan letter to the fanzine. So I started hanging around with him. He had access to free printing and he was also a poet. I'm not sure exactly how you would describe his poetry: he was a William Burroughs disciple who cut things out of newspapers and reassemble them into long poems that were really good. He eventually killed himself. He was pretty inspiring.

MH: When did your world start to crossover into the other scenes in New York at that time?

RK: Not until I started to make movies.

MH: Around the time you arrived in New York the whole No-Wave scene was happening.

RK: I would go and see Lydia Lunch. James White and the Contortions I saw a bunch of times, he was really entertaining.

MH: Did you see your interests as being aligned with what you were seeing in the clubs?

RK: Yeah. Everything was very negative! [Laughs] It was very nihilistic!

MH: How did you start to make films?

RK: I was still doing the fanzines but I'd always wanted to make movies. I'd made some Super 8 films in high school and I took one film class in college, but dropped out immediately because I hated it so much: not film criticism, which I loved, but actual film making. It sucked! Actually I don't think it sucked it was probably just my attitude that sucked! [Laughs] When I arrived in New York I would go to all these underground screenings: I'd be one of the ten people who showed up at places like Club 57 on St. Mark's Place, and the Millennium Cinema. In college I had been the chairperson of

the film committee for the student union so I could get to see all these experimental films there too. But when I was in New York I decided that I had to finally make films for myself, so I bought a camera for five bucks at a garage sale and I shot my first film 'Goodbye 42nd Street': it was just two rolls of film. I entered it into what was billed as an 'open screening' and they rejected it saying that it promoted the wrong "moral values"! This was at ABC No Rio - a kind of club cum artist-run space - and I was like 'How can this avant-garde club reject a film for an open screening?' An opening screening!

MH: On finding out that your work promoted the wrong "moral values", did it occur to you then that you run into censorship problems for the rest of your life?

RK: No! I was just shocked. Anyway I eventually showed it to some other people and they said 'This is really good', and gradually people started to invite me to take part in screenings. I showed 'Goodbye 42nd Street' a few times, and people like the filmmaker Beth B and her husband [Amos Poe?] were really into it: people that I really admired. So I decided I would make more films, primarily because I was finally getting the attention that I craved! [Laughs]

MH: Did you establish in advance what the content or aesthetic style of the films would be?

RK: No, not really. I was just doing it, pretty much like with the fanzines. I would simply try to figure out some kind of basic idea. Like the writing I did in the fanzines the films were basically a stream of consciousness.

MH: But the films were reflecting some of your preoccupying interests, interests that seemed to correspond with other people's activities, such as Lydia Lunch?

RK: In a way, but I didn't really know Lydia then. But a friend of mine, the artist David Wojnarowicz - who I had gotten to know through Montana Houston - and some other people from around the East Village clubs, such as Danceteria and the Peppermint Lounge, were really supportive. I would go like 'Hey I want to make a movie' and they didn't say 'You're crazy!': instead they said 'Let's do it! Can I be in it?' That kind of attitude helped to move it right along. Eventually after being in New York for a while I finally started to feel like I belonged to something: we were all egging each other on, and that's a

huge thing - to have people egging you on.

MH: A lot of the work around that time portrayed a fairly nihilistic idea of both self-identity and sexuality?

RK: It was the opposite of the hippies, it was a reaction to the 'free love' era.

MH: Was it also a reaction to the orthodox aspects of the 1970s art world?

RK: Oh yeah, for sure. When I arrived in New York I felt that the art world was such bullshit: when I saw what it was really like and how it seemed to depend only on who you knew - it wasn't what I had expected.

MH: Did you see yourself as working in a different context, or, at least, with a different attitude?

RK: I guess I just turned away from the art world. Even though I wasn't producing anything to put me in there, I was still turning my back on it anyway! They wouldn't accept me or what I was doing, so I decided to just do my own thing. It was like announcing 'I am not an artist. I will have nothing to do with that bullshit scene'. David Wojnarowicz didn't cut himself out of it, he still worked within the system, and initially we thought that he was really stupid for doing that, although within quite a short time people started to buy into his things, and we then started to think: 'Maybe he's not so stupid after all!' But I was just anti-everything basically!

MH: When you started making films were you familiar with Nick Zedd's work?

RK: I'd seen his movies and thought 'this guy is great'. He was an influence. And Beth B's movies. For me the chronology is really clear: From Beth B in the 1970s and the No-Wave scene, then Nick changed things - because a lot of the No Wave movies were so serious, just dead serious, and very slow. Nick managed to make filmmaking feel more like a comic book, it was a big change to see that.

MH: That period of filmmaking - with which you are associated - has become known as the 'Cinema of Transgression', did you actually view yourselves as being transgressive?

RK: Nick Zedd created the label 'Cinema of Transgression', but it was definitely something that we all identified with. At the time I think I thought my lifestyle was very normal but when I look back it was totally abnormal: a lot of drugs, a lot of hating everybody - all this kind of basic punk rock stuff.

MH: You have spoken in the past about the films in relation to your use of heroin - about how the tone of the films was conditioned or determined by your heroin use.

RK: Also the angst. The heroin just focused all the negativity into one place, when I quit heroin that negativity kind of dissipated.

MH: What was your relationship with sexuality and the films?

RK: Both the movie making and the heroin use was all anti-sex to me. I was depicting sex in a way that you normally didn't see it in mainstream movies - where couples kiss and there are burning candles with a swelling soundtrack. I was more interested in having Audrey Rose getting her nipples pierced, with her screaming in pain! Or Lydia Lunch and Marty [SURNAME] in 'Fingered' just bitching at each other for the whole movie, and when they eventually have sex it is more like a power trip than like a romantic scene. 'Manhattan Love Suicide', which was earlier, sort of summed up my own personal life: Every time I got into a relationship I just wanted to kill myself! I didn't really fully get into using heroin until around the time of 'Manhattan Love Suicide' in 1985, and that was a big release because that wiped out the need for romance! But as far as sexuality coming back into my work - that wasn't until after I quit drugs. After I quit using I also felt that I didn't have anything left to say with the movies, so around that time I started shooting photographs. Photography seemed to be a really safe way to get into intimate situations with other people. I hesitate to use that word 'intimate' - but that's what it was, a situation without any kind of strings, without all the stuff that goes along with a relationship. This was how it seemed to me at the time!

MH: What were the first photographs of?

RK: I started taking photos of a girlfriend of mine naked, then my roommate - who was a girl - naked, and then her friends naked, and then their friends naked, and then their friends naked ... basically it was whoever I could get naked!

MH: Did you ever try to explain to your models what you were thinking about?

RK: [Laughs] No!

MH: Did you know what you were thinking about?

RK: Again I don't think that I thought about it too self-consciously. But I do know that, at the time, I thought that this might not be such a bad thing to be doing in twenty or thirty years time: Just hanging out and photographing people without their clothes on - that might be interesting!

MH: Your subjects, the women and men - although it was mostly women - were drawn from the East Village punk, and post-punk, communities. They weren't the typical subjects of nude or erotic photography. Were there precedents that were important to you?

RK: There were people whose stuff I liked. I was, and remain, easily influenced! I had always liked a lot of photographers work, even before I was a heroin addict. I was into a lot of Czechoslovakian photography, as well as people like Duane Michaels and Helmut Newton: people doing odd stuff, but I didn't set out to emulate them. I just approached it with the attitude: "we're in this situation, let's do whatever". And there must have been some bondage photographers who I was looking at too because I was also shooting bondage pictures. It would have been around that time that I met Eric Kroll, and he was an influence. But I wasn't specifically thinking of art influences because, for the most part, I didn't really see much art.

MH: What decisions were you making formally: a lot of the early pictures use very theatrical or cinematic lighting?

RK: I'd taken a weekend course in movie lighting, maybe no more than six hours - and I had a set of 'hot lights' so that was probably played a part. I should also add that when I was initially doing these photos I wasn't thinking of them in terms of art: I was just doing what I was doing. I didn't show my work in galleries until around 1995 when my first book 'New York Girls' came out. After I had made a number of films the people who were distributing them asked me if I was interested in doing a book. So I went to Los Angeles to meet with them with my box of photographs and I laid my prints out on the floor and it occurred to me then that I didn't have anywhere near enough

photos to do a book - I had maybe twenty good photos, if that, maybe only ten. I realized then that I wasn't really a photographer, I was just calling myself a photographer. I really needed to shoot more. So I went back to New York back and tried to become a photographer.

MH: You said that you 'tried to become a photographer', what does that mean?

RK: Well I'd taken photographs all my life, but it wasn't an occupation, I was a hobbyist.

MH: You described one of the appeals of photography for you as the possibility of getting into an 'intimate' situation with someone else. Did you see this ritual of being photographed or photographing as a collaborative or collusive act between you and the subject?

RK: Yeah, it had to be a 'collusive act' because they were totally involved in coming over to be photographed. Years later I can look back on it and get a read on what is going on in someone's head, but at that time it was all new to me, I really didn't know what was going on with people or what their, or my, motivations were.

MH: Would it be too simple to say that the motivations were that on your side it was slightly voyeuristic, and on theirs slightly exhibitionist?

RK: Way more than slightly! It was way over the top voyeuristic!

MH: But outside of your personal investment in the images those early pictures do portray or convey an atmosphere or attitude that would, at the time, have been largely hidden from public view? They depicted sub-cultural (sexual) identities that would have been largely invisible - in the mainstream at the time - but which have now been fully assimilated into the mainstream media?

RK: Well to me it just seemed like those ideas were there already. But a lot of the reception and reaction to those images has to do with the fact that they were brought together in a book called 'New York Girls'. I labeled them, just like Nick did with the 'Cinema of Transgression'. Because there were other people making similar photos too, not just me, but they didn't

have a book out called 'New York Girls'.

MH: Did the publication of 'New York Girls' represent a kind of closure on that period of photography for you?

RK: Yeah. Right after that time there was a kind of gray area. It had more to do with technique, with me switching from one technique to another: often just in the lighting, which was not so stylized or dramatic. It was a significant shift for me but I'm not sure if anyone else would have noticed.

MH: There's an enormous difference between 'New York Girls' and the book that followed it 'Model Release'. The whole staged, theatrical nature of the photographs in 'New York Girls' with the extreme lighting has gone. In 'Model Release' you appear to be working more with natural light, and there is a move away from the edgy nature of the settings and scenarios. A different kind of intimacy seems to be brokered in 'Model Release'?

RK: I think that the same kind of transgressive material is there: it just looks different. Its the same subject matter but without the theatrics.

MH: Would you say that your interest were consistent - between 'New York Girls' and 'Model Release' - or were you actually thinking about other things and different kinds of pictures?

RK: I wasn't heading towards a definite point. I think in this new book 'Soft' there are some specific threads that are radically different from others: such as my interest in voyeuristic photography. There is also a softening of the images, its just not as blunt. There are a lot more ways to show perversion than showing someone tied up: not perversion exactly, maybe subversion.

MH: 'Model Release' is introduced by photographs of the models holding up their I.D.s to the camera - to prove their age - and with a copy of the legal contract between you and the models: which frames your relationship with the subjects in a completely different way?

RK: Well that's true. The context was really different: the girls in 'New York Girls' were all friends who were mostly working for nothing. I made those photographs after hours when I wasn't working in construction or making rock videos. By the

time of 'Model Release' I was a full-time photographer so there was definitely a different approach. There was the same degree of intimacy, but now it was more like a production line or an occupation, but still with the same motivations! It was very business-like, I would tell the models, "I will pay you this much, and you need to sign the release". It was a way of saying "I have no further obligations to you", and that they had no further obligations to me. Basically it became professional.

MH: One thing that constantly comes up in relation to your work is the question as to whether these are pornographic images. One line of criticism against your work would be that it continues to perpetrate the objectification of women. It seemed to me that in 'Model Release' you were, in a way, trying to address this dilemma. To what extent do you think you are making pornographic images? Does the word 'pornography' make sense to you in relation to what you are trying to do or what your reasons for doing it are?

RK: By the time 'Model Release' came out I was already working in the pornography industry, which initially had been an economic decision. After I graduated from doing construction work, I was shooting some rock videos, and then a friend who was an editor at Hustler magazine said 'I know that you took these photos of some young looking girls, and we have a new magazine called 'Barely Legal' can you send some in?' I did and they sent me a check for something like \$2,000, and I was like 'Man! \$2,000 for this?' so I actively started pursuing more work from sex magazines. The day I got that phone call saying 'Yeah we like this stuff and we'll give you \$2,000' I was working on a rock video that had taken about two weeks of my time and my total pay was something like \$800: it was a super low budget, and given the contrast between that and the work for sex magazines, there was no question as to what I should be doing - because you've got to do something that gives you the money that will allow you to do your own work. And photography costs a fortune, so I just threw myself into it.

MH: How did you distinguish between your own work and the work you did for sex magazines?

RK: There were girls I was shooting for both sex magazines and for my own work. I don't say that 'this is porno, and this isn't', but I will say that a particular batch of images was made for a sex magazine and others were not. And I have very different relationships with the models: it is clearly defined

before we even start shooting. I will always ask 'What do you want to shoot for?', 'How much do you want to make?', 'This is what's involved ...', 'If you want to shoot for a sex magazine ... this is what could actually could happen ... it could actually come back to haunt you". There is always that kind of conversation. Whereas if the model is a friend of mine then its more 'Whatever'.

MH: Increasingly your work has started to appear in the context of mainstream fashion magazines, which over the past decade have absorbed so much of the aesthetics of the pornography industry. The mainstreaming of sexualized imagery is now so apparent: but clearly that wasn't the case even as recently as the mid-1990s?

RK: I've got this picture on my wall of Kate Moss for 'Obsession' by Calvin Klein, lying face down on a couch naked: something akin to child pornography right there in regular magazines. But I see what you are saying because it was the same with my films too: because you didn't get to see that kind of sexualized material in mainstream movies, instead you would see it in the kind of movies you would see on 42nd Street, in low budget exploitation movies like 'The Last House on the Left'.

MH: In 'Model Release' would you agree that the images moved more towards that resembles more 'classical' portraiture?

RK: The photographs were always portraiture.

MH: However in 'Model Release' there seems to be a different kind of intimacy?

RK: At that time I was trying to find a reason for, or justify why the models might have no clothes on! [laughs] I was trying to ask myself why they would have no clothes on, why are we actually seeing this? Another big change was that I started to include a lot of windows in the images, so that you would see more than just the naked model. In 'New York Girls' everything was very closed in, claustrophobic - just like New York is.

MH: In 'Model Release' the reader is very aware of the trappings of domestic environments: which seems to change the tone of the images. In 'New York Girls' it invariably looks as if the images are shot in a studio - an artificial environment - even if in reality it was simply a

room in an apartment. In 'Model Release' there appears to be a move towards a kind of naturalism?

RK: After 'New York Girls' I was trying to get away from the highly theatrical and stylized scenarios: which were often very grim or dramatic - or at least it seemed grim and dramatic to me. So in 'Model Release' I was trying to make the images appear more 'real' or naturalistic and in 'Soft' I am trying to make it appear even more 'real', which represents a significant shift.

MH: There's a notable degree to which the images in 'Soft' have literally 'softened', they are far less sexually graphic?

RK: The work softened, but that said, people seem to have way more problems with 'Model Release' than they did with 'New York Girls'.

MH: Perhaps the problems they might have with 'Model Release' are because it complicates reality, whereas 'New York Girls' was, through its theatricality, was somewhat divorced from reality: it documented a sub-culture, which might be seen as somehow 'other'. The new photographs in 'Soft' are probably more troubling because of their relationship to the everyday: as the images get closer to a kind of naturalism or realism they develop a kind of tension between reality and fantasy?

RK: For me the most interesting thing about the new work is that - even though they appear naturalistic - they are all totally fake. And the more 'real' they appear to be the more fake they actually are. Of course all photography, to some degree, is fake.

MH: The title of the new book invokes the ideas of both 'soft core' pornography and of 'soft focus'?

RK: It's like 1970s soft-core: like David Hamilton's work, which is dreamy soft-core, but which is often more erotic than all the in-your-face stuff.

MH: Showing your work in galleries seems to further complicate the images, because not only are the images circulating in sex magazines, fashion magazines, mass market coffee table books, but there are also appearing within the context art - which is the context you came from. By now there are so many potential ways in which to

'read' your work: readings that are dependent on their context - what happens when the images enter into the art world? Dose the art world legitimize the images in a way that other contexts cannot?

RK: The idea that I was an artist, making art, was definitely in the background the whole time. Being an artist had been my dream since college, but I got seriously sidetracked! [Laughs] I'm sure the art world could legitimize the work: but that assumes that it will ever be accepted there, which I don't know if it ever will. The art context increasingly helps me to focus: for example I know exactly what my next gallery show will be about. I'm shooting specifically towards an exhibition, not a book, and I have never done that before.

MH: What is the difference?

RK: Before I was just shooting for the sake of shooting and end up with a number of individual images. In 'Soft' I'm developing a thread that I have been exploring for more than a year now: based on the kind of voyeuristic images that have proliferated since the emergence of the internet. It's an idea that seems to encompass a lot of possibilities and seems to have the potential to take the work to another level.

MH: The recent work plays off our fascination of seeing individuals - and often celebrities - caught in compromising situations: images we are familiar with from the tabloids. These kind of voyeuristic or paparazzi images depict scenarios not intended for public view, they tap into a larger notion of collective voyeurism. In your staging of these types of images you seem to be commenting on the nature of voyeurism rather than simply creating voyeuristic images in and of themselves?

RK: I'm making fakes, and seeing how well I can make fakes. In trying to make these images look so realistic it is another kind of naturalism. I recently showed some of the voyeuristic images in Italy and people asked me "Are these real? Do these people know they are being photographed?" and for me that was a success right there.

MH: 'Soft' is in many ways a book in two halves: the first section is a continuation of the intimate, domesticated images first seen in 'Model Release', whereas the second consists entirely of staged 'voyeuristic' images: in your words 'fakes'. The first section seems to reflect your own

voyeuristic tendencies whereas the second section seems to be much more about society's relationship with voyeurism. You seem to be suggesting that the voyeuristic impulse is within all of us?

RK: And that it is inherent to photography itself. It's not just paparazzi images, but also the whole genre of 'sneaky' or voyeuristic photography: I don't know what they call it, or even if it has a real name. I spend a lot of time searching the web for these kind of images, which sometimes become the basis for my own images: in terms of composition, setting etc. There are real distinctions between the paparazzi who will shoot celebrities in compromised situations, and the thousands of anonymous individuals who are shooting voyeuristic images for no other purpose than to prove that they saw and photographed, say, a naked or partially naked woman, without their permission. Whereas before, with most sexualized images, there was always an agreement, or contract, between the model and the photographer: "You are agreeing, I am agreeing ... we are going to do this." - whereas with 'sneaky' photography there is no agreement. It's a legal gray area.

MH: In 'Soft' there is a distinction between private space - the domestic settings - where the collusion between you and the model is clear, and then on the other hand there public space, where your relationship with the subjects appears unclear. Is what takes place in the public domain considered to be fair game?

RK: Yes. And that's the law too.

MH: This threshold between the private domain - which we might understand as a 'mutual' context - and the public domain - where everything is fair game - seems to provide a significant tension in 'Soft'?

RK: Except that all my images - including the seemingly voyeuristic ones - are staged: even though they might not necessarily appear that way.

MH: So they are a commentary on these issues?

RK: I think so, but they are still also evidence of me acting out my desires: but operating within the safety of a legal contract with the model. But it's really always been my interest to see that serendipitous flash of skin.

MH: There is one particular image, which may not eventually appear in 'Soft' which perhaps explains, or comments upon, our collective fascination for voyeuristic or 'sneaky' images, which is your restaging of a paparazzi image in which the actress Catherine Zeta Jones was photographed heavily pregnant, topless whilst smoking a cigarette: an image that originally ended up in the tabloids. Not only was Zeta Jones photographed topless - itself a tabloid 'scoop' - but she was also caught in the highly compromised position of smoking whilst pregnant. You recreated this image using a pregnant model. Can you say something about your motivations, because obviously the Catherine Zeta Jones image is, on many levels, shocking: in that we rarely see a celebrity in such a compromised situation.

RK: I didn't really see the original image as shocking. My attitude was more along the lines of "This is great"! [Laughs] That someone managed to get that shot seemed incredible. After I recreated that image, or at least referenced it, I sent it to 'I-D' magazine, and they said "We can't run this ...You can't show a pregnant woman smoking" and I said "The image of Catherine Zeta Jones was published doing it, why can't I?" Seeing an image like that of Catherine Zeta Jones contradicts her public persona, it completely shatters her public image. The tabloid original was obviously super-invasive, but when I recreated it, I saw it as just being a beautiful photograph: a sublime image of a pregnant woman, where the fact she is smoking is secondary. I didn't think of it as being taboo. Although I do remember at the time asking the model if she thought having a picture of herself smoking whilst pregnant might be an issue. But again it is important to reiterate that even that image is a fake, because she wasn't really smoking.

MH: You mentioned before that all photography is, in one way or another, fake?

RK: My fascination with 'sneaky' or voyeuristic photography is that you are never really sure as to what is a genuine candid image or whether it has been staged or contrived. For me this is their appeal: the fact that you are never really sure about what you are looking at. Whereas paparazzi images are generally not faked, they are more like documentary photography: that is how they find their value, because they are deemed 'authentic'. And whilst some of the 'sneaky' stuff is contrived they are often really good photographs - photographs that nobody ever really sees unless you actively

look for them on the internet: in that way they are really pure.

MH: There is an amateur aesthetic to 'sneaky' photography, whereas by now you are a skilled photographer. In this new work you are trying to mimic the surreptitious and serendipitous amateur aesthetics of 'sneaky' photography?

RK: My favorite website is a site called www.redclouds.com, which is just amateurs taking pictures of themselves having sex, which they send in and get posted. I see so many great images there, and the reason that it is good, or better, is because it is presumably authentic: people are actually having sex and taking the photographs. It is not professional: unlike the sexuality depicted in professional pornography - pornography shot by professionals with professional models, you can't get any faker than that. You open any sex magazine and there is a girl with a totally glistening body, perfectly done hair and make-up, the entire spread has been air-brushed, and this isn't just pornography, it's all photography. I cannot get aroused by that kind of sexualized imagery because I know that it is so fake, it is beyond fake, because I've shot it. The people are generally simply going through the motions. I hire the girl from an agent, I know what she will do: her resume will say "BG, GG, Anal, Inter-racial, Girl-Girl stills, Girl-Girl soft video", whatever. Whereas pornography magazines in the early days were kind of real, in the sense that it was kind of a lifestyle, but now it has become an industry. You see the same situation with fashion photography, where a huge amount of effort is given to make photographs that look like snapshots of people in real situations: images that appear 'real'.

User

Darren Flook on the phone to Richard Kern

Interview

2002

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.

Richard Kern is at the ICA, London 19 July - 8 September 2002