

BOOK TEXT

SOFT

2004

Universe

Richard Kern in conversation with Matthew Higgs: New York

Introduction

by Matthew Higgs

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.

Richard Kern in conversation with the author, 2004.

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 Andrzej Wajda'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'. Art 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 could be for me.

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 was 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 on the walls. 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. This was at the height of conceptual art which had become a 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 you 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 is. When I eventually got to New York it was a whole different thing. I still made fanzines though: I would 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 reassembled 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 Scott B 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 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. A friend of mine, the artist David Wojnarowicz - who I had gotten to know through Montanna Houston - and some other people from around the clubs like 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. 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 thing, 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 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. Or Lydia Lunch and Marty Nation 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 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. It's 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, it's 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'.

Kern Noir

2002

Charta, Italy

by Geoff Nicholson

Richard Kern once told me how reading an interview with Larry Clark changed his life, or at least his art. In the interview Clark was asked why he'd given up black and white photography in favor of color, and Clark found that an absurd question. This was the nineties, he said, what kind of idiot would still be shooting in black and white in these modern times?

And Richard had to admit that he was precisely that kind of idiot. He had long been working in black and white, not least because it was a cheap medium and he could do his own processing, but suddenly that wasn't good enough. After reading that Larry Clark interview he started shooting in color. Thus are major creative decisions taken.

Fortunately, as the photographs in this book show, he has never completely abandoned black and white, and we should be more than grateful for that.

Once it used to be very simple, or at least very simplistic. Black and white photography equaled high art, whereas color photography equaled vulgar commerce. Well, we got over that one, and now photographers can use whichever form suits their purposes. And it seems to me that one of the purposes to which Kern has often put his photography is finding a form and content that depicts and embodies his beloved New York. In that sense he is documentarist as well as a portraitist.

New York is one very black and white city; it's high speed, high contrast, high grain. It's the city of William Klein and the early Andy Warhol movies, the city of Weegee and Garry Winogrand. Richard Kern and his photographs fit right in.

Admittedly he was born in the American South, in North Carolina, and yes, he now shoots quite a lot of his photography in Los Angeles, but New York is where he lives, where he made his reputation, and it remains a city with which he has a profound, symbiotic relationship. In many ways Kern strikes me as the quintessential New York photographer.

His early images, some of which (unlike Cindy Sherman's) actually are film stills, have an edge to them precisely because they're shot in monochrome. The women always look fabulous. We know that their lips and nails are probably red, but they register as black in Kern's photographs and that appears incredibly sexy and dangerous. Their hair looks either jet black or bleached blonde. Even the blood and gore in the early videos and stills looks black. This isn't the art of ambivalence. And once the models have guns in their hands, the photographs look like wanted posters. A wanted poster in color would be unthinkable.

Richard Kern's development as an artist has certainly involved his world view becoming gentler. These days his models are as likely to be seen brushing their

teeth or eating oatmeal as they are brandishing guns or dildos. But this is not to say that his world view has become entirely rose-tinted.

There's one photograph that, for my money, embodies all the great Richard Kern virtues. It's called *Monica in Elevator*, (1993) and it shows a naked woman, or I suppose we should say a "New York Girl" posing in the corner of an elevator.

The photograph's composition is unusually formal, with diagonals that draw the eye into the picture. The girl's pose is hard and angular yet the body is soft and curved. Monica looks simultaneously tough and vulnerable, exposed yet closed up.

No doubt there are elevators like this outside of New York, and no doubt there are girls like Monica there too, but New York is where they come together. And they come together on film, under a harsh light, in black and white rather than color.

And you have to feel a little sorry for Monica there in the elevator. You know that pose can't be very comfortable, and she's having to sit on the dirty floor of the elevator. And you can tell exactly how dirty it is because you can see the sole of one of her feet, and it's completely black. Would that picture work in color? Fuggedaboutit, as we like to say in New York.

Model Release

2000

Taschen

Introduction

by Lucy McKenzie

A word that is used in connection with Richard Kern is transgression, mainly due to his protagonism in the 'Cinema of Transgression' in the 1980's. At the time when I started modelling for Richard I didn't think of it in connection with this idea of transgression, or really question my motives for it at all. At the time I had an eighteen year olds het-up opportunism in me and this was an exciting situation - the chance to get to know an artist who's photographs and especially films I admired very much. And as far as the porno aspect of it, I liked the idea of these having these images of myself and I still don't understand why more people, given the chance, don't do it.

Now I realize how much participation 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 the thinking about, and making of art it is clear that the examination of the very private, personal and sometimes squirmingly embarrassing can be a fundamental element. I got a kick out of sticking my ass in the air (I think all men and women look their best on all fours, ass in the wind), and as an artist it just seemed like a curious way to open up windows in my own individual psyche that in everyday life would never get the chance.

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. It felt so totally normal, chatting the way we did about John Cassavetes or Depeche Mode or whatever, except you are a naked 19 year old tied up in the bath, and you're being photographed by a 42 year old pornographer for money. Any tension thrown into play by basic sexuality involved a photo shoot was diffused by the cartoonish power roles we fitted into. It wasn't this totally cold unsensual experience or anything, there was just a clear, understated, understanding that neither photographer or model was impressed by the predetermined power structure that exists for this kind of encounter between men and women, artist and model.

His work is in a good position in that it is not discussed widely in the normal language of contemporary art the way somebody like Nan Goldin's (one of his vague contemporaries in NY 'scene' social strata) is. He hasn't been codified and it makes his images sit in this uncertain position - are they really corny or actually quite good? Helmut Newton is pure art whether it is classified as fine art or not, as is the graphic designer Peter Saville, sitting on the fine line between art and other cultures. Because Richard uses such a templated subject matter there is this easy linear way to discuss and judge his work, in relation to other artists depicting sexualized women, but I think this kind of reading fails to do him justice. On the other hand though, categorizing him purely as porn shows just how much he widens the scope of this genre.

I have always responded to the morality in his work. It is not a hard-nosed political anti-societal stance, but it definitely comes from punk and alternative culture. His amusing frankness, cockeyed theatricality, unashamed naked lust over imperfect young girls. Richard would be the last person to lie or be pretentious about what he does, and I salute him for it.