Richard Prince From the Panama Canal Zone. Place isn't even there anymore. I grew up outside of Boston. In a suburb. Moved there in 1954. It was part of a development. About thirty houses right next to each other. Put together by one contractor. I remember the contractor's name ... Campenelli. Our house burned down three months after we moved in. Bad fireplace. Cheap. Plywood. Lawns wouldn't take. Everybody had a new car. Halloween was great. Ice cream truck in the summer. Honeydip donuts on Sunday mornings.

**Jeff Rian** I wrote somewhere that artists of your (our) generation learned about images, TV, music, magazines by themselves — after school. Those things were the basis of our informal education — the exciting one, the one outside school, which was square. We were all self-taught. We were the first naturalized citizens of an electronically programmed world. In art school we learned about the School of Paris (Picasso, Matisse, etc.), the School of New York (Abstract Expressionism) and Pop Art. You once said (in our 1987 interview in Art in America) that everyone is a Pop artist. Clearly a step had been made. Was it rock and roll? Was it an album cover made to go around the thoughts and sounds and jokes in our heads?

Richard Prince It was certainly rock 'n' roll. I remember first hearing Little Richard. Immediate connection ... immediate. Don't know why. Just did it for me. Elvis' 'Hound Dog'. Fantastic. I'm like six years old when I hear it. I remember my parents letting me play it in a diner, on one of those little juke boxes they had at the end of the table. Incredible. And yeah, we were the first generation actually to grow up on TV. I mean you're five years old and you're grooving on 'Zorro'.

**Jeff Rian** You were an artist as a five-year old?

Richard Prince Five years old. Yeah, I was an artist. I stayed in my room all day. I rearranged my furniture ten times a day. I used to vacuum the carpet like a baseball infield, crisscrossing with diamond shapes. Everyone is an artist when they're five. Then they take it away from you. They make you tie your shoes. Eat your vegetables. Go to school. Clean up the yard. Get on the bus. I was in love with 'Zorro'. The TV show. Once a week, seven o'clock at night, on a little black and white. It actually comes into your living room. And it's what matters. It's what's important. The whole concept. Like Superman. During the day a regular guy ... but the other side, something like a hero. I made drawings of Zorro. I think that's all I did for two years — make drawings of Zorro.

**Jeff Rian** You were a Pop artist already?

Richard Prince All kids are Pop artists. A little later it got a bit more sophisticated ... It's "Twilight Zone". Totally real. Real scary. Under-the-covers real. You didn't have to leave your house for this stuff. It was free. And it wasn't in school. It wasn't part of the programme. There was no homework to do. You got to
choose from a whole lot of shows. The choice became the act. This is what I like. This is what I chose. It was available. It was there if you wanted it. To show, the magazine, the movie, the records were all there. Not like before. Everybody had a radio. Everybody had a TV. Everybody had subscriptions. Everybody went to the movies. Or at least that's what I thought. Because that's what I did.

And album covers. John Hammond covers. I remember wondering when he got those clothes. Kind of the same reaction to Bernado in West Side Story. I saw it when I was twelve. I mean, I grew up in the suburbs ... no one wore cool clothes. I had never seen a white Levis jacket or a small trim black suit with a purple shirt before. These things became important, for me. They were signals, signals, things that didn't need to be explained. I knew what they meant right away. What they looked like, what they sounded like ... I knew they were cool, and what was great. A lot of other people were feeling the same way. It was incredible how important hair became to a teenager. Some teenagers died for a 'do'. I remember this kid in my eleventh-grade class, who used to sit in front of me in homeroom. He was told to cut his hair. This was 1966. A 'not yet' year for personal expression among the younger set. Anyway he got so pissed he came in the next day and had completely shaved it off. Bald. It freaked everybody out. He was in a band. He had a great voice. He knew about the Yardbirds. He knew about the movie Blow-Up. He should have dropped out, because he was already tuned in. But instead he killed himself. Two days after the shave. He was serious about his hair, never bought that shit about his 'imbalance'. These things are out there. The way a pair of boots were pointed, man that's what was important. I would have died for a pair of Beatle boots.

Jeff Rian: Did you go to an art school?

Richard Prince: No. I applied to San Francisco Art Institute in 1972. I proposed that I would drive the teachers around the city in a 1968 Dodge Charger, the same one that was in the movie Bullitt. The school would have to buy me the car. Basically I'd be a high-octane chauffeur. I guess they thought I was trying to hustle them. I didn't get accepted.

Jeff Rian: How did you get to the New York art world?

Richard Prince: I first went to New York in 1973. I went there because of what I had seen in a photograph. It was of Franz Kline staring out the window of his 14th Street studio — feet up on the sill, cigarette in hand, his face a mask, intent on what he was thinking about, looking out over that scene, what was outside the photograph. Whatever was in that photograph was what I wanted to be. That kind of desire and the way of seeing the world started for me around 1963. I stopped thinking that way in 1977.

Jeff Rian: What happened?
Richard Prince  The photograph of Kline was a life that I wanted but didn’t have. I wanted to be alone in a studio surrounded by the world, instead of being alone in a room surrounded by a family, a dog, wall-to-wall carpet, a driveway, a lawn, a small two-way street, and a backyard where the grass grew, and another house just like the one I was living in. In 1973 I came to that world. I got a loft on Renwick St., just west of Hudson, just north of Canal, just south of Spring and just outside of SoHo. Finally I wasn’t outside looking in. I was in. I was alive. Moving to New York was hard. I didn’t have any money. I didn’t have any friends. I didn’t know anybody. What would it have been like? I didn’t want to ask that question. I needed to be in the picture. IN THE PICTURE.

Jeff Rian  Art students in the early 1970s learned about the New York School, Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, Minimal and Conceptual Art. Your early photographs combine Pop Art imagery with a Johnsian matter-of-factness: what you see is what you get. Illusion is all but gone. Were you thinking at all about Johns?

Richard Prince  Yeah, I was thinking of Johns’ target with the plaster moulds on top. Johns’ stuff was about the subject matter. Subject matter first, the medium second. Flags, targets ... If you think about it, they were pretty close to folk art. He made them. He didn’t paint them. He made them beautiful. I think the beauty was subversive. That’s pretty much like folk art. I remember him saying in the movie Painters Painting that he’d never really heard of Marcel Duchamp. Me neither.

Jeff Rian  Isn’t advertising also a kind of folk art; a big, expensive version of Pop Art? It’s like jungle art, with big noisy drums, semi-nude chicks, barking voices, voodoo, enticement and allure, all the way to the fire or the rack – folk artists with accounts at Dean & DeLuca. Johns was an upstate antique hunter, hanging out with the art elite and power poets. His flags were totems. He jumped right into the taboo with the flag – without being veiled or working up a sweat. A few artistic generations later, you played a similar kind of shaman game by wearing us masks of fate and destiny. Models, porn actors, rock stars, celebrities, biker girls, waves, cars, all wanting to be in a picture, all wanting to live forever. You’ve mentioned that you thought of your works as objects. Was this also a move away from single objects, maybe even the Johnsian object?

Richard Prince  I started to think of a photograph as an object and not a repetitive multiple. I mean, for me the frame around the photograph was important; how it was presented and hung on the wall. The edition was important. I started making editions of two. Not quite unique but almost. Up to then most photographers didn’t care about editions. Most of them made editions of fifty or open-ended editions. Making an edition of two was really shooting the sheriff. To this day I’ve never had one of my photographs bought by The Museum of Modern Art or reproduced in a straight photography magazine.

Jeff Rian  In the late 1970s the big attraction was New Image Painting. Holly Solomon opened her gallery in SoHo with Pattern and Decoration paintings, like Kim
MacConnell's. Canal Street artists were still unknown. Photography was something altogether different. Was there something in the air that gave you permission to do a kind of picture that no one, then, could really figure out? And how did you come to figure it out — what you did?

Richard Prince  Yeah, you're right, there wasn't a lot of photography around. Pattern painting, New Image painting. I remember I wanted to make something seamless, no telltale signs about how it was put together ... no cut-up paper, no pasting, no pencil. I wanted it to look as if it had been sent away for. I was working at the Time-Life building in this department called 'Tear Sheets', where I would cut up all their magazines and send the editorial parts up to the people who called down for them — to the authors. By the end of the day I was left with the advertising sections and nobody called down for those. They were like these authorless pictures, too good to be true, art-directed and over-determined and pretty much like film stills, psychologically hyped-up and having nothing to do with the way art pictures were traditionally 'put' together.

I mean they were so off the map, so hard to look at, and rather than tear them out of the magazines and paste them up on a board, I thought why not re-photograph them with a camera and then put them in a real frame with a mat board around the picture just like a real photograph and call them mine. I mean 'pirate' them, 'steal' them, 'sample' them. I figured no one was going to like them ... not the subject matter, much less the way they were produced ... forget the way they were produced ... 're-photographed' ...

But I thought this was it. This was the break. This was what I was hoping for ... the dive into the empty pool, the dive off the empty wall, the can of shit, the nude descending the staircase, the African mask, the dripped paint, the huge canvas ... I don't know. What I put out wasn't a collage, it was a real photograph, with everything a photograph has in it.

Jeff Rian  Photographs can take us to the very edge of possibility, to our most reckless fantasies. A memory elicits a ring. Often they remind us of things we know, and show us things we don't know. They might be about a subgroup, but they hit a larger group right in the crotch and between the eyes. But why photography?

Richard Prince  Why did I use photography? I didn't know anything about photography. So it was a way to put together a picture that I didn't have any history with. I didn't have to care about the medium because I didn't expect to get anything out of it. I had no mentor. I had no method. I had no ideas. I had no technique, no training, no experience. For me, it was all brand new.

Jeff Rian  At the time photography was barely considered an art form. It was usually put off to the side with artefacts and crafts.

Richard Prince  There was the John Gibson Gallery where the artists were using photography to back up a narrative, using it with words to present a pseudo document. People like Peter Hutchinson, Bill Beckley, Vito Acconci, Bill Lunberg, James Collins. They used photography as an ingredient. It was supplemental.
It wasn't editioned. It wasn't matted or framed. I think what I got from them was that even though my photographs were presented or looked like normal photographs, I still treated photographs as 'objects'. I made editions of two. I put them in traditional frames. Normality was the next special effect. I had no 'expertise' with the camera. I didn't use a dark room, I took them to a lab. I was like the guy who would pick up a guitar, never having played one, and one week later would be on stage at a downtown club fronting a band, maybe with a new sound. Only I used a camera.

Jeff Rian  From the beginning, your photographs contained the tricks and traits of avant-garde art: pushing margins, working with a hot but not-yet accredited medium, photography. Then you added what you call the 'sent-away-for' elements. You photographed a really well-made photograph, and got it without the sweat and the hassle. But you still had to go through the motions of cutting up pictures, making selections, re-framing them, buying slide film and making a choice. More than that, you had to recognize the possibility that you could redo an existing picture, and that there was a different kind of product available for the so-called taking. Then, you still had to go out there and schmooze and show them to people. How did you allow yourself (give yourself the permission) to reread a picture that was unlike what was then hot in art, and how did you feel doing them? Did you know what you wanted the pictures to look like? Did you have an aesthetic look in mind? Or was it really the look of a photograph of a photograph?

Richard Prince  I don't know ... there was definitely an 'attitude' involved in standing behind the camera looking at a tear sheet from a magazine and re-framing the image, then clicking and depressing the shutter, knowing that what would come out was pretty much what was 'almost there'. And I think ALMOST is the thing here. I mean the picture I was taking wasn't going to change. It would look the same today as tomorrow. And it was 'almost' the picture it came from - pretty much what I could wrap my 35mm lens around.

Jeff Rian  Were you at all aware of or involved in the 'Pictures' show that Douglas Crimp and Helene Winer had organized at Artists Space in 1977?

Richard Prince  There was no connection with Crimp or Helene Winer. That was later. I did the deed in 1976, the break so to speak. Yeah, I was thinking today about what it was like working without a net. You know, taking a chance, placing a bet. I mean there was no model, no instructions, no one to ask for advice.

Jeff Rian  The 'pictures' generation – Cindy Sherman, Sherrie Levine, Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, yourself – based art on a kind of resonance principle: shared associations were drawn from audiences by giving them pictures and styles they were familiar with. The 'photograph' was essentially the impetus for a mind game of illusion based on memory. The photographs could have been made by someone else. In your case they were. This made them like ready-made souvenirs – like tokens and cards that drew on the memories of those looking at them. This is like participating in someone else's dream (which is how advertisers try to manipulate us to get our attention).
If artists like you began to ‘use’ photography, was it because pictures had become an ingredient in our mind games and part of the palette in our forms of representation?

Richard Prince  I'm not sure I want to be in someone else's dream and I don't think I want them to be in mine. Or is it: I'll let you be in my dream if I can be in yours?

Jeff Rian  In your early works, like Untitled (three women looking in the same direction) (1980), or even Untitled (three hands with watches) (1988), people are looking into space, like they could be waiting for a phone call or a bus. Then suddenly with the Sunsets (1986), an apocalypse is going on behind them while they frolic. The picture has got much hotter. What were you thinking about when you made the Sunsets? How did you make them?

Richard Prince  I wanted to make an image that looked as if it had been made by someone else. These images were before Photoshop. Before digital. Before computers. But they had that ‘impossible’ look. Purple Haze. They were in and out of focus at the same time. The rear-screen projection look. They were over-determined. Psychologically hyped up. Artificially defined. Japanese fake. Times Square cut-up. They had that production quality, like they were art-directed. They were like primitive storyboards, splashes ...

Jeff Rian  What about the Entertainers (1982–83)?

Richard Prince  Technically they were the same as the sunsets, except that they were portraits of people in the entertainment business. Not successful people. In-between success. The Sweet Smell of Success seekers. Really colourful with non-art graphics ... Times Square graphics in a big Plexiglas box container, the frame leaning against a wall. These people would appear in gossip columns in the New York Post. They all had names, made up ones, spelled differently.

Jeff Rian  How did people respond to your work? Who were the members of your first audience?

Richard Prince  I wasn't really aware of any audience or response. The first audience I think was mostly other artists and people exactly like me.

Jeff Rian  What other artists?

Richard Prince  Artists like Jenny Holzer and Cindy Sherman. I was playing in bands with Glenn Branca and Frank Schroder. Going to clubs like Tier and the Mudd club. I remember going to galleries like René Block and seeing Joseph Beuys' coyote piece (I Like America and America Likes Me, 1974). A lot of Artist's Space openings.

Jeff Rian  When — or how — did you start thinking in clusters, in series, in ‘gangs’ as you called them?

Richard Prince  The gangs were a photo-lab thing. There was a term used at the lab about ‘ganging’ pictures together on one negative, putting nine or twelve 35mm negatives onto one big 8 × 10-inch negative. It was a way to organize your work. When I realized you could do this gang thing and blow up the one
negative on a huge piece of photo paper and have the nine different pictures come out next to each other, seamlessly, it changed the type of image and the type of magazine I looked at. I realized I could have a whole show on one piece of paper, instead of nine or twelve pictures in a room, on different walls. I could have the nine or twelve pictures in one frame, on one piece of photo paper. It meant I could start using pictures from different magazines. Not just the advertising sections but the editorial sections. I could push nine or twelve slides. (I still continue to use, and have always used, 35mm colour slides.) I could 'arrange' those slides on a light box, tape them together – gang them together – send them to the lab, and they'd take the taped slides and transfer them to an 8 x 10-inch inter-negative. That was it. Anyone could have done it. It was easy. Any nine or twelve slides taped together. The slides could be of anything. Taken from anything. From surfing mags, motorcycle mags, porn mags, pet mags, joke or treasure-hunting magazines. Everyone out there has their own magazine. And the slides didn't even have to be that good. They could be out of focus, overexposed, black and white or colour. You just gang them together and gave them to the lab. The lab would give you back this big 90 x 80-inch photograph with all those pictures on it – each one about 8 x 10 inches or about as big as it was when I first saw it. The space between each picture was just the slide mount. It's not what I made up. It was what was made up for me. Made up. I made up what was made up.

Jeff Rian  A lot of the 'gangs' are of subjects who know they're going to be in a picture, who want to be in the picture, who might die for it, like the eleventh-grader did over his hair. You talked about your pictures being 'almost' all of the picture. Those folks knew they were going to be in a photograph. You cut out part of the frame, maybe bringing them in closer. Your pictures, because of what they are – pictures about being photographed – draw us inside a feeling that is 'almost' the real thing, the put-on we have in our heads, the person we want to be in a photograph, even the person or the self we put on in the morning or at night or on weekends. Is it an alter ego? Is it the image the kid died for?

Richard Prince  To die in the picture. You can certainly die outside the picture. I think you're alive in the picture. You're more alive in the picture than outside the picture. At least you go on living in the picture after you're dead outside it.

That's the way we look. That's the way we want to look. To be pictured. A portrait. The Girlfriends were portraits. They were pictures of the way I wished I could be. Maybe it's a kind of stupid desire. Passion. Is passion what we are? Is that what we are in pictures? Is what we are in pictures almost real? Maybe it's become the 'most' real thing. I mean, the picture I take has already been taken. I take it again. My picture is seamless. No cuts. No scissors. The camera as electronic scissors. It makes the magazine picture a photograph. 'The photograph is 'close'. It's real close. Close to the real thing. Yeah, self-consciously real. When you're taking a picture you're conscious. You're woken up. You're up. You're up yours.
Jeff Rian  I woke up at 3 a.m. thinking about this interview, and imagining the comedian Milton Berle in his suit telling jokes we'd heard a thousand times. They were funny. They weren't funny. It didn't matter, they were jokes. They were written on 3 x 5-inch cards. Jokes set up situation possibilities. Then I imagined your works - the pictures, gongs, jokes, hoeds and paintings - as being haunted by a world of TV watchers and magazine mavens looking for a life and dreaming about their own. The watchers are the kids who grew up on Borscht-belt comics like Berle. They are noisy bikers and their reckless girlfriends. The guys who live next to the girls next door (all of them), the folks on both sides of the bar, the saps at the gambling table, the loners and longing lovers. Everyone of these TV watchers and magazine mavens is implicated in ads showing beautiful girls and handsome, indifferent guys (but maybe not so 'easy to handle' as the word 'handsome' implies) showing off their watchets, looking like they have a different kind of access to a different kind of dream world. The TV watchers and audience members dream of fame, access, money, a good lay, a whore dressed like Lois Lane, a man in glasses, 'Real Big Surf', or simply a safe suburban house or an apartment uptown. They make up their own visions which someone eventually makes a magazine about, showing them dunking their heads in buckets of beer, lapping their girlfriend's tits, sticking their tongues out, dressing up like satyrs and cross-dressers, wearing dark glasses, telling jokes fraught with humiliation and indifference. Some of them have turned away from the formality of the silent suburbs and live in an informal underworld of anger and abandonment. This is a world of endless jokes - the best refuge for a person with a grudge.

Then there are your pictures. The pictures are silent. All photographs are silent. What they seem to be about is an experience of desire and the hope that turns so many of us into comics, bikers, actors, artists and crooks. Who are they? What are they? Where do they come from?

Richard Prince  Criminals and Celebrities ... Bitches and Bastards, The Velvet Beach ... Live Free or Die ... Girlfriends and Untitled (parties). You forget what you did. Sub-pop pictures. Mainstream cults. Off the road, not on it. They weren't exactly obscure pictures. I mean they all had their own magazines. You could find them at any newsstand. Today they're all over fashion mags and MTV ... in music videos, in TV ads. What was out is now in. Out and in. Like fucking. Fucking the picture. Yeah, maybe re-photographing a picture is like fucking a picture. There is something sexual about standing behind a camera and staring at another picture. It's hard to explain. It's like you've captured it. Even before you've taken it. Before you press the shutter. You can stare at it all day. The picture will never change. You don't need the right light to re-photograph a picture. You don't need the right moment ... You don't need to be lucky.

Criminals and celebrities were perfect for a 'gang' photo. It was so perfect. You could even turn the photographs upside down and sideways. It was definitely a mix. Making that 'gang' was like deejaying ... Spinning the records. Dancing the picture. I wonder if I own one of the Criminal and Celebrities editions. If I don't ... fuck it.
Jeff Rian  There is almost no artist's 'veil' in your pictures, no sleight-of-hand illusion. You show things as you find them. But in the selection, in the framing, in the choice of words like 'gang' or 'girlfriend', a vision is conveyed. A lot of works are also untitled, with a kind of description in parentheses, such as Untitled (three women looking in the same direction). That's where you set up a kind of question. Something else is going on. That's when viewers start thinking and wondering about themselves. As you've said, you just 'put it back out there'. This is also making the familiar strange. Is this 'the night of the living dead', where the picture comes back as Casper the ghostly picture? Is the girl next door a shared memory? Does the guy get a job, but NOT the girl? Is our apocalypse a hangover? Does anyone ever get laid the way they'd like? Are both the guys and the chicks putting on an act because they don't have a clue about how to deal with life in relation to the dream experience? Is the only hope the joke at the end of the day? Is God Milton Berle -- a bad joke writer, but a joker just the same?

Richard Prince  I don't know, the untitled and the parentheses thing is a way to title and not title ... to have it both ways I guess ... a way to change my mind, a way to describe the piece specifically, a way to make the familiar strange. Yes. The more one sees the same thing, the better the chances for the thing to be true. The three women looking in the same direction ... that has to be true because it looks true. Again, it's just a feeling. It's twilight. It's in between. Just out of reach. I'm always falling out of planes and landing on top of buildings that don't have any windows or stairwells, only tightropes that are so loose you can only hang onto them with your hands. And then there's the clowns begging you to let go.

Jeff Rian  You use just about every medium used by artists working in a studio: photography, silkscreen, painting, sculpture. You also hook them all into the entertainment age -- movies, puzzles, and desire stream out of still and moving pictures. You mix photographic realism and a style of abstraction. Are you comfortable with all those media?

Richard Prince  Realistic or abstract: those were what I thought my choices were. I always thought I'd be an abstract artist. I don't know why. I've never thought much about the different mediums I work in. Whatever fits the subject. The subject comes first. Then the medium I guess. Like the jokes. They needed a traditional medium. Stretcher, canvas, paint. The most traditional. Nothing fancy or clever or loud. The subject was already there. So the medium had to cut into the craziness. Make it more normal. Normalize the subject. Normality as the next special effect. It's also a question of restlessness. Not wanting to be bored. You know, surprise yourself. One day it's a photograph, the next it's a painting, the next day I'm working on a book, the next day I'm casting something. I don't know. People like Bruce Nauman, Sigmar Polke, Andy Warhol, they did the same thing. Worked the same way. Collecting has become more a part of the work. You know with these publicity pictures I'm doing now, I don't really think about 'how' as much as 'what'. What comes first. What's not on second. What's on first.
Jeff Rian  Two artists from America’s golden decade – the 1950s – seem to be likely precursors: Warhol and Rauschenberg. Both involved big media, both used silkscreen. Were they important to you?

Richard Prince  De Kooning was important to me. And Rod Serling’s ‘Twilight Zone’ TV series. And ‘Spy vs. Spy’ in Mad magazine. And, yeah, I’ve always loved the way Warhol would shoot a film and just let the film run out of the can and that would be the end of the film.

Jeff Rian  Are there photographers who also caught your attention?


Jeff Rian  In 1939, Clement Greenberg wrote his well-known essay ‘Avant-garde and Kitsch’: ‘He said that kitsch was not art. He didn’t like De Kooning, Warhol or any of that. As an American living in Europe now, I’ve come to learn, kitsch is something different from bad taste. It has a kind of taste. There’s an aesthetic. It’s sentimental, but it’s not Las Vegas, Liberace or Milton Berle. It’s someone turning a log into a teddy-bear or painting a ceramic pitcher to look like wood. It’s a custom car and a tyre planter. Greenberg would have hated this stuff – maybe your stuff, too. But he lived when he lived, and ultimately went down in flames. The world disagreed with his brand of art-school formalism – even though the guy had really brilliant moments. Pop Art put Greenberg’s formalist diatribe to bed. OK, be had a grudge, an axe to grind. Earlier you talked about images you chose as being ‘sub-pop’ – the biker chicks, the cheap cartoon jokes, the bad jokes, the basketball nets, the car hoods. Are these subcultures? Are they the pioneers of bad taste? Are they the soul of America? Was Spiritual America a disguised version of Eduard Munch’s The Scream (1893)? Are the emotions a cross between Nietzsche and Elvis and Evel Knievel?

Richard Prince  Bad taste? Yeah … I don’t know. The way people dress and look. When people don’t care. Taste … What’s beautiful, what’s ugly? It’s kind of a silly question. I mean maybe that’s why Greenberg burnt out. He cared too much. The paramount thing is not to care. It’s like a dog chasing its tail. The chicken or the egg. Who knows if it’s popular? More than 50 per cent? If it becomes a fashion, a trend? As for kitsch: the answer is a revolving door. The answer is blowing in the wind. There’s no such thing. It’s what makes you feel good. It’s what makes you feel bad. It’s feel. You feel. Laughing and screaming. It used to be bad. Now it’s good. But it’s still bad. It turns. I turn it. I turned it. Maybe it had already turned. Turns out … Turns out it was always there. Always there. That sounds like soul.

Jeff Rian  You gave the biker chicks a second look. You turned them into artworks. When you put your pictures in front of a different audience, are they like slice-of-life striptease for connoisseurs? Were you putting them out there like Velázquez did with those dwarfs?

Richard Prince  Velázquez? Dwarfs? No, I always thought the Girlfriends were just portraits. Like Diane Arbus. They were normal pictures. They had their own
magazines. They were Snow White. The seven dwarfs were outside the picture. What’s in a photograph is real. What it looks like is what it is. You look at a photograph in your lap. Sitting down. It’s usually in a book or a magazine. You usually turn a page. The best photographs are sexual. Photographs are sexy. I guess that’s also a way of answering the Pictures generation question.

Jeff Rian: Photographs are real, but when we start looking for similarities, say between ourselves and a celebrity, reality starts turning to jelly. I mean the photograph may be what it is, but the people looking at, say, really hot sex pictures, start thinking about themselves. That’s when the picture takes on a different dimension. That’s when people start thinking and fantasizing. Icons are anonymous images that look like something familiar, but take us out of the present by reminding us of something else. Photographs function as ‘reminders’, too. They are the cheapest, most highly evolved form of self-expression ever devised. They are our anonymous artefacts. Everyone has them. Everyone makes them. They fit everyone’s perspective. But the religious fervour has been traded in for an orgiastic barbecue or some great beard.

The giggly kids in your apocalyptic vacation Sunsets, the Bitches and Bastards, the lovers stuck on an island, a girl with her pants at half mast: these watchers and dreamers share an experience we’ve all had in pictures. Still pictures, moving pictures, dirty pictures, the pictures of themselves where they think they look like the people in the magazines. The experience is a memory that did or didn’t or might happen ... if only some kind of wish were fulfilled or some accident or magic could intervene. This is where the soul comes in, where rock ‘n’ roll and Sam and Dave and Nietzsche’s Dionysus and St. Augustine’s ‘dark night of the soul’ is a 3 a.m. nightmare vision. And somehow this is where your works seem to get their synergy. This is where soul and attitude meet.

Richard Prince: What about rubber soul? Is that the kind you can bounce off? I’m staring at my Beatles gold album of Abbey Road – I bought it at an auction a while ago. Lennon looks so fucking great crossing the road. In his white suit. White sneakers. He must have been a really fucked up guy to do what he did.

Jeff Rian: For some years now you’ve also started taking pictures of basketball hoops, neighbourhood girls, car meets, garages, tyre planters (which later became cast sculptures) and so on. What was the impetus?

Richard Prince: Living in New York for twenty-five years. I was living inside. Inside buildings, inside apartments, inside magazines. I was taking pictures of things ‘inside’. Then I moved to upstate New York, where I was outside. So I started to take pictures of things that were outside.

Jeff Rian: You’ve also published them in magazines like Purple, where I’m an editor. Is this a way of sneaking back into the world you’ve been usurping all these years? How do you feel about them? Are they really about the girl next door, the guy in the garage?
Richard Prince  The *Girlfriends* first began when I re-photographed biker girls that had their pictures in biker magazines. Then, when I moved upstate, I actually met some real biker girls, at biker parties. I started to take their pictures, but it wasn't the same. I liked it better when I'd buy the magazine and look at their pictures that were already there. Anyway I'm getting used to seeing things outside of magazines.

*Jeff Rian*  You are also a collector of books, art, a few cars. Are your latest photographs also a kind of collector's art? Are you the conservator of a museum of lost souls?


*Jeff Rian*  What's the difference between your generation and those who came before — between then and now?

Richard Prince  You know the biggest difference between us and the people who went before 'us' is the auctions. I mean 'they' ... Pollock, Rothko, Newman, Picasso, Duchamp, Klein — yeah, Yves — they didn't have to live with people fucking speculating on what they put out. I mean it happens twice a year, October and May. These auctions. It's unbelievable. Unbelievable. I guess that's the word. Anyway ... just a what? ... A reaction? An episode? A knee 'jerk'? ... I don't know ... How do I know? Am I suppose to like it? Feel flattered? I'm at the end of a dead-end dirt road reading skin magazines. Tits. That's what I like. Tits.

I just finished a piece I've been working on for ten years. It usually doesn't happen like that. It's a 'hood' piece. Anyway I'm sure the usual references to Rothko will apply. Maybe he was painting hoods, car hoods ... fuzzy cloudy car hoods. I don't know — that's the trouble with his work: I don't know what he was painting. Anyway, I just finished this car hood. Finally. Now it makes me want to paint more hoods. That's the trouble with finishing something. You know somebody is gonna take it away and you're left with what? Money. Yeah money. But you don't have the hood anymore. This is the only 'hood' I have. It was the perfect thing to paint. Great size. Great subtext. Great reality. Great thing that actually got painted out there, out there in real life. I mean I didn't have to make this shit up. It was there. Teenagers knew it. It got 'teen-aged'. Primed. Flaked. Stripped. Bondo-ed. Lacquered. Nine coats. Sprayed. Numbered. Advertised on. Raced. Fucking Steve McQueened.

*Jeff Rian*  So do you hate to let a picture go? Do you want it to stick around?

Richard Prince  Letting things go ... Once in a while I hold on to something I've done, but not much. I've been trying to hold on to a couple of new *Cowboys*. They're done differently now. They're done digitally ... meaning I can re-photograph the entire ad. I don't have to shoot around the copy because we can get rid of the copy with the computer and Photoshop. So now I get the whole picture. They're the shape of the magazine page. Sometimes a two- or three-page spread. Anyway, I've tried to hold on to some of these. I do about two a year.
They're pretty cinematic. Maybe if I made less work I would be less inclined to let things go. But I make — or at least I think I make — a lot of work. It's just the way it is. Letting it go is easy. Of course with the early stuff ... in the beginning it wasn't even a question. Nobody wanted it, so I just kept it.

Jeff Rian  The other day I asked Klein Fleiss, the publisher of Purple magazine, what she would like to ask you. She wondered how you managed to continue to be such a vital artist and not just a member of a generation of artists?

Richard Prince  I don't know ... Maybe thinking I never had an audience. Never thinking anyone was ever looking. Never thinking anyone ever expected anything. Maybe being half-successful. The paramount concern was never to care. I remember what Lawrence of Arabia said when asked why he crossed that impossible desert, so that he could attack the Turks from behind — he said, 'because it was fun'.

1  Jeff Rian, 'An Interview with Richard Prince', *Art in America*, New York, March 1967