

PREFACE

Richard Kern: Model Release, 2000

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

Now I realise how much participation 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 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 in 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 nor model was impressed by the predetermined power structure that exists for this kind of encounter between men and women, artist and model.

Richard's 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 the social strata of the NY "scene") 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 what he produces 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 sexualised 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 - this amusing frankness, cockeyed theatricality, unashamed naked lust over unperfect young girls. Richard would be the last person to lie or be pretentious about what he does, and I salute him for it.