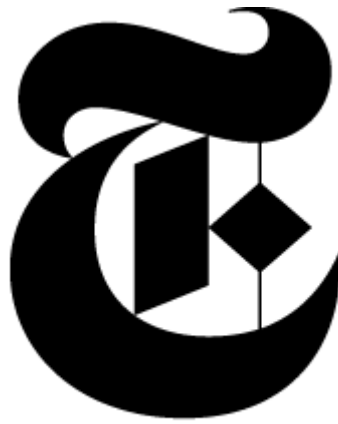


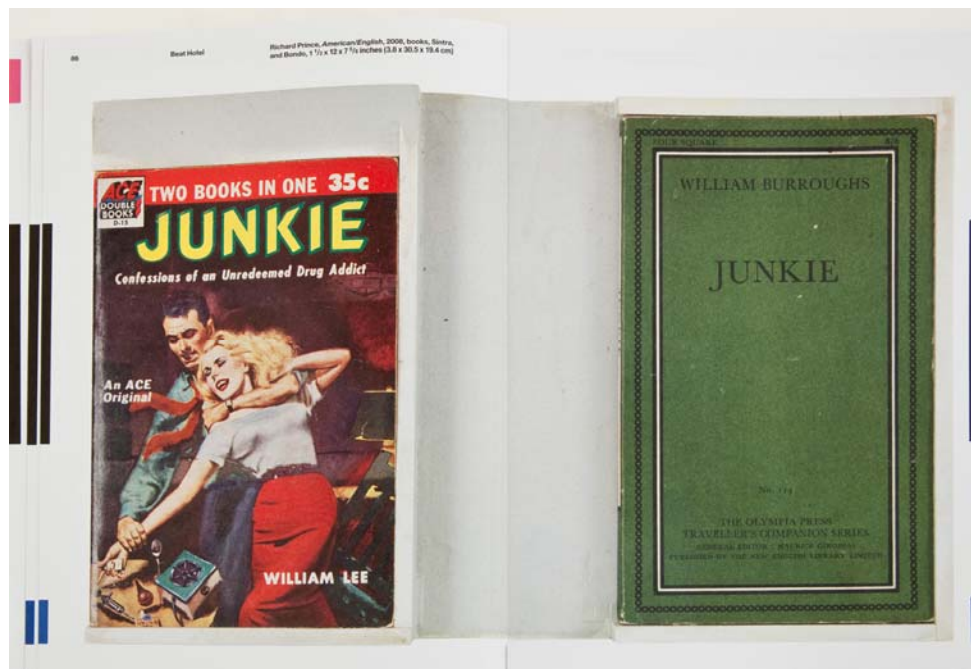
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Richard Prince's Library Privileges

CULTURE | By DAVID KENNEDY JONES | SEPTEMBER 19, 2011, 5:30 PM



Above, pages from "Richard Prince: American Prayer."

Here the artist photographs books by William Burroughs and William Lee.

You've probably been wondering what the tidy rare-book librarians at the National Library of France — that storied caretaker of French literature — have been up to these past couple years. It so happens that they've been huddled among the dark shelves of their naughtiest stacks, digging through dusty boxes of pulp pornography, detective stories, light erotica, a Dutch magazine called Suck and "authentic novels of flagellation from the early 20th century."

Rest assured that these efforts of France's finest have gone to a good cause. The long-forgotten volumes that emerged from that excavation were quickly funneled through the occasionally deviant filter of none other than Richard Prince, the artist who for decades has been compiling and reworking the artifacts and autographs of what he calls "anything Beat, hippie or punk," along with everything else that has struck his eclectic fancy over the years. It's a peculiar way to make a living, and one that more than a few of us wish we'd thought of. His process is to head over to Christie's and buy, say, an 1899 copy of Bram Stoker's "Dracula" with "the only known dust jacket gracing its boards," then take a photograph of it. Last step: hang that photo in a gallery and become famous.

That's not all. He's been known to package these rare books inside new, custom bindings, then place them on a shelf in his living room. The result? *Art*. And sometimes, he buys the original painting that was used for the cover art of a midcentury dime novel that few people have read, then frames it next to a copy of that same dime novel. The result of that effort? Also art.



Of course, more than a few people insist that Richard Prince is no artist, and that his little projects are not art. Criticism of Prince has ranged from the dismissive to the scornful to the litigious. He's been called a pirate, a charlatan, a photocopier, a hoarder for snobs and gallery types, and, to make things really nasty, a man of bad taste. There's also the crowd that swears up and down that he's a pedophile at worst, and downright creepy at best. His 1983 photograph of a 10-year-old Brooke Shields was recently yanked from the walls of the Tate Modern after a warning from Scotland Yard.

And let's not forget that the photograph in question was not exactly Prince's to begin with. In fact, it was originally a 1975 work by Gary Gross, the late American dog portraitist (not a dig at Shields; the man was, quite literally, a portraitist of dogs). Prince's input was simply to take and display a photograph of this photograph — a signature technique he calls "rephotographing." Unfortunately for Prince, no invented term nor treatise on fair use could stop a federal-court judge in New York from ruling last March that Prince was in violation of copyright law — not for the photo of Shields but for appropriating an entire photographic essay on Jamaican Rastafarians for use in his own show at the Gagosian Gallery in Chelsea.

But appropriation is Prince's mode, and he's become quite good at it. In fact, when the National Library of France decided this year to host a retrospective of his work, Prince turned his method of appropriation onto the library itself. "Find some pulps for me," he told their librarians, referring to the lowbrow literature that he has collected (and appropriated) for years. When the librarians finished their wicked little search of the National Library's stacks, they returned to Prince with some surprising treasures, not least of which goes by the noble title "Laisse Donc Mes Fesses Tranquilles" ("Leave My Butt in Peace"). Rather than squatting anonymously in unvisited corners of the library, these books now have the honor of being rededicated as Prince's newest readymades.

To help us make some sense of this sprawling career, we now have a nearly 600-page book published alongside the National Library's retrospective. "Richard Prince: American Prayer" (Rizzoli, \$65.00), accompanies the library show in taking on the hefty task of shaping Prince's material into something workable — a mission it accomplishes by organizing the artist's work into chapters built around

conceptual vortexes of history and culture and artistic impulse. In a way, the book itself seems to apply Prince's own cataloging techniques to his own *oeuvre*. The results, from Prince's multimedia juxtapositions (an autographed photo of Anna Kournikova sharing a frame with a still from Stanley Kubrick's "Lolita" to the liberal sampling of other work (whole pages are transcribed from some of the books in Prince's collection), makes for some fine reading and a generous dose of 20th-century nostalgia.

Some chapters send us back to the Beats and the Black Mountain writers, with one piece showing us a series of canceled checks from the erstwhile Phoenix Book Shop on Cornelia Street in Manhattan, written out to luminaries like Diane di Prima, Gregory Corso and Philip Whalen. Other chapters give us Prince's paintings of one-line jokes ("I can clearly see you're nuts," etc.). The most common element, though, is Prince's impressive collection of rare books, many of which have been packed into custom-made covers designed to resemble the leathery bindings of encyclopedias or parlor sets of the Great Books. This curious library stands among the more obvious examples of how Prince has seized ownership of the cultural artifacts that have come before him, then sewed them, like a spider might, into a husk of his own making.

These retrospectives on Prince allow for a historic collision between art and the book, where the spaces between collector and librarian, librarian and artist, or artist and thief are impossibly muddled. Fortunately, ours is an age where ownership has slipped back into the plasma of unresolved terms, so Prince, trapped as he is in the 20th century, may very well be flying the most decidedly appropriate banner for our time.



Prince's photograph of a 1956 edition of "Howl and Other Poems," inscribed by Kenneth Rexroth.



An untitled Ektacolor photograph by Prince.



Prince's student 1968-69 I.D. card from the Université de Caen, France. At right, an excerpt of an article by Prince in *Purple Magazine*.