

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Saltz, Jerry. "Sleight Slight of Hand." Arts Magazine. Vol. 64, No. 5, Jan. 1990.

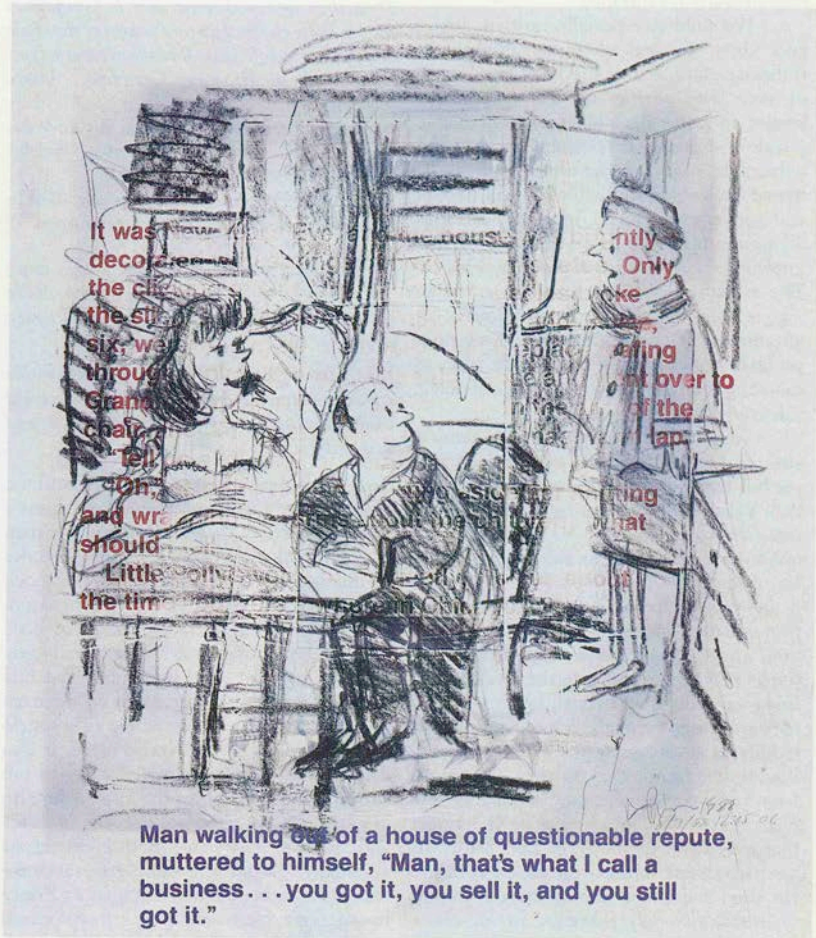
Sleight Slight of Hand

Richard Prince's *What a Business*, 1988

In *What a Business* (1988) Richard Prince sounds a major note in a minor key as he combines many of his past techniques and ideas into a single compact drawing. Prince is an artist who rarely shows his hand—who plays his cards close to the chest in more ways than one. An early, if not the first, practitioner of "appropriation" and the first artist to rephotograph photographs—he is also known for retelling and redrawing jokes. In all his work Prince maintains an aloof profile and a charged reticence. Without giving himself away, Prince's work holds up a mirror that aestheticizes but also singles out a whole range of social habits—some less savory than others. Among other things, much of his previous and ongoing work is involved with advertising and its ability to seduce and deceive, the banality of isolated repeating gestures, and people, places, and things reduced to idealized poses. Stag films, pictures of war and waves, bikers, travel posters, sunsets, and heavy metal bands have all provided the raw data which Prince has crossbred into eerie and alarming super-stylized portraits and lexicons of modern life.

Jokes have provided a second way of extending his implacable vision. Instead of holding up a mirror and laughing at society, Prince ironically observes society malevolently laughing at itself and others—how it makes fun of women, homosexuals, and politics in particular, but also the drunk, the stupid, and the unfortunate in general.

So far Prince's "jokes" have taken several forms. There have been jokes that simply isolate a text on a bland ground—written out or printed onto monochrome canvases. There have been captioned cartoons that the artist has redrawn. He has combined several different cartoons—much the same way he photographs his well-known "gangs"—calling up



Richard Prince, *What a Business*, 1989, Acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, 24" × 18". Courtesy Barbara Gladstone Gallery.

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NOTES ON A DRAWING

Jerry Saltz

similarity and difference in each multi-paneled grouping. And in a little-known group of works the text-joke and redrawn image-joke have been layered together, scribbled on and worked over so that a confusing collage, a para-aesthetic mixture of language, image, and marking is produced.

This series, which has yet to be exhibited, shows another side of Prince's sensibility. They are the most gestured and certainly the most handmade work he has made. But even when he shows his "hand" he maintains his cantankerous distance.

For children especially, cartoons, jokes, and "dirty" pictures often provide the first titillating glimpse into the forbidden world of sex. They portray the body (women's bodies in particular) in every conceivable position—naked and as victims, wanton and vulnerable, stupid and frivolous. To the uninitiated they show that which is still unseen and not yet experienced. Jokes and cartoons allow the unsayable to be said and the unknown body to be at least partially revealed. The implication of intercourse in a "dirty" joke or "dirty" words in strange limericks are all tantamount to saying or seeing what cannot yet be done, where looking takes the place of touching and hearing takes the place of doing. (Much the way it does in art.)

Jokes, of course, also release tension and produce pleasure—in a deceptively simple but highly complex form. In "Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious" Freud discusses how jokes function as a way to "liberate one from the bonds of an exacting and ruthless morality." Ultimately, a joke is a judgement—but a playful judgement—which in turn equates to playful, aesthetic contemplation. They reveal the similarity in dissimilar things and give meaning to the meaningless. Jokes say what they have to say in a myriad of ways: using wrongly constructed words, modifying or changing the order of words, double entendres, etc. As they are passed from person to person they acquire an intimacy. Often they produce a bewilderment that gives way to illumination. They use words as a plastic material much the same way Prince has used words and photographs as plastic, malleable materials. Jokes get around obstacles and are a way to take pleasure in nonsense—without heeding "the compulsion of logic." Basically, jokes can represent a rebellion against authority and authorship—and

questions of authority and authorship have long been right up Prince's alley.

In *What a Business* Prince plays with "homeless jokes"—free-floating representations and undelivered punchlines—torn out of the world of anonymous and mundane humor. Prince has often dealt with generic representations of machismo. Here he uses three jokes layered over and around one another which combine to produce a single ambiguous impression dealing with men and women, infidelity, and prostitution. The first joke, at the top of the drawing, printed in red and at times disappearing, reads:

It was New Year's Eve and the house was brightly decorated with sprigs of holly and mistletoe. Only the clinking of Grandma's knitting needles broke the silence. The children, Polly, eight, and Janice, six, were seated before the roaring fireplace leafing through a picture book. Then they rose and went over to Grandma's rocker. Polly climbed up on the arm of the chair, and Janice snuggled into Grandma's warm lap.

"Tell us a story, Grandma," Janice pleaded.

"Oh," said the old lady putting aside her knitting and wrapping her arms about the children, "What should I tell you?"

Little Polly's voice came gently, "Tell us about the time you were a whore in Chicago."

The joke beneath is in blue and is more decipherable. In fact it is placed where the "caption" of the drawn joke ought to appear. It reads:

Man walking out of a house of questionable repute, muttered to himself, "Man, that's what I call a business . . . you got it, you sell it, and you still got it."

Both jokes deal with women as prostitutes. The first is a warm cozy scene that begins a bit like *The Night Before Christmas*, but then out of the blue the word "whore" intrudes on the narrative—producing a kind of shock and uttered, no less, by an eight-year-old girl. The second joke describes a kind of male anger and resentment towards women in general and prostitutes in particular. The title *What a Business*, is taken more or less from this joke and acts as something of a touchstone or tip-off for the entire piece. It also describes a type of commerce which is not altogether unlike that of the artist, who also in a sense "has it" (the work of art), "sells it," and "still has it" (talent). Both jokes are unabashedly plagiarized—and are somehow bad. By isolating them in this manner Prince has succeeded in revealing the true emotional content of the jokes—malevolence and anger.

Underneath all this is a messily scribbled but accurate rendition of a cartoon that might have come from *The New Yorker* or

Playboy. But there is no punchline to this joke. An older, balding man stands at the bedside of a youngish, buxom woman, while an older, well-dressed woman (his wife?) enters the room. The latter looks mad—they look contented, if a little surprised. The viewer is thwarted in trying to find the meaning, or the "answer," to this image as it begins to collapse into a protean dense black hole of an anonymous joke.

The printed jokes function as colors, and the whole thing looks a bit like an American flag, or a piece of colored fabric, or a drawing by Rauschenberg. If the viewer literally "reads between the lines" of Prince's drawing, further layers of jokes and in-jokes appear. A more innocent, if obscure, humor comes into focus. Prince has scribbled the words CRAZY CATT on the cut-up and pasted-together surface. Near the Crazy Catt doodles (another cartoon character) are the words CRAZY DOGG. A play on the name Crazy Catt—but also a play on the circulating rumor (and rumors are yet another anonymous carrier of information) that Prince is at least one of the anonymous artists who are in fact the pseudo-artist John Dogg. It's a bit like trying to discover whether "the Walrus was Paul"—nonsensical, infuriating, but intense. In-jokes give the false impression that we're closer to something than we really are.

Under all these jokes and in-jokes are vague photo-transfer-like images—barely distinguishable—which appear to be representations of a row of soldiers with guns standing in review at the top—more men in uniform at the bottom—and a bull on the left. All are further echoes of past Prince motifs, and all enter into the perverse and elaborate conversation that is now taking place not only in the drawing but in the perplexed, but transfixed, viewer as well.

Finally at the bottom right Prince has signed the drawing. Even this becomes a joke. Not only has he placed his name, followed by the year, the month, the day, and the year again—but the time as well: 12:05-06. One minute. It took one minute to make the work—thus Prince plays with and makes fun of the bourgeois notion of the work of art as something that is labored over for endless hours and is therefore "worth" the asking price. It also bounces off all the jokes around the issue of time. Warm, cozy, privileged time—cold, isolated, zipless time—instantaneous, adulterous time—and here the time of creation of a work of art (art time). In this "joke-us interruptus" Prince has packed a punch that seems to be encyclopedic. □

Jerry Saltz has edited several books on contemporary art. His column, which concentrates on a single work, appears monthly in Arts.

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