

BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

IN MEMORIAM | Rene Ricard (1946 - 2014)

by Raymond Foye
December 18, 2014



RR by Allen Ginsberg, 1986. Courtesy of the Allen Ginsberg Estate.

Growing up in Lowell, Mass., I often took the train to Boston to visit Gordon Cairnie's Grolier Poetry Bookshop in Harvard Square, hoping to encounter an authentic poet. Harvard and Inman Squares in Cambridge had a handful of cafes, storefront galleries, and publishing collectives. The scene was dominated by the gothic shadow of John Wieners, already possessed by drugs and madness. In a rare reading on Mother's Day 1973, I witnessed a stunning performance by Wieners, who read every poem he'd ever written to his mother, about 15 in all. It was over in five minutes but remains as vivid as anything in my life. Thirty years later on the day John Wieners died Rene Ricard left a wet gray canvas at my door that read, in a desperate scrawl: "John Wieners, my mother, is dead. Oh my God."

Even from an early age Rene Ricard was famous in the Boston poetry community for his wild beauty, fierce intelligence, and fearsome wit. He dropped out of school after completing eighth grade because he knew more than his teachers, constantly correcting even his French teacher in class. Soon he embarked on an independent study program that largely involved seducing Harvard boys. When I visited Provincetown for the first time in the early 1970s, Rene was also famous there. Even when there were only 15 or 20 people who knew who he was, he was famous. It was an aura that surrounded him from the start.

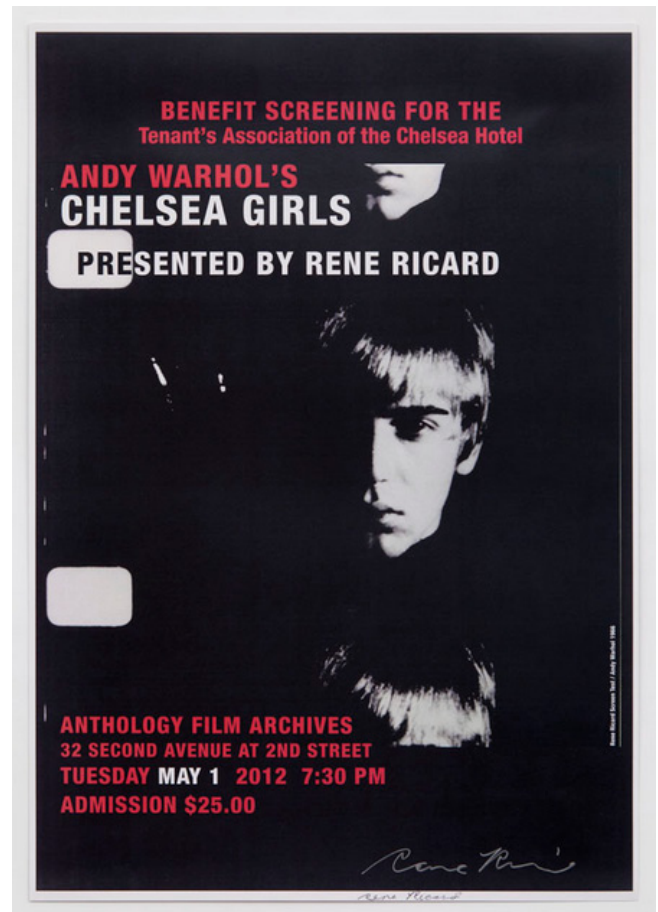
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Born at the marvelously antiquated-named Boston Lying-In Hospital (later Brigham and Women's), Rene would always bristle when his birthplace was listed as New Bedford. In his day that was a considerable step down, despite the fact that in the 19th century New Bedford claimed the highest number of millionaires per capita in the U.S. (courtesy of the shipping and whaling trades). Rene grew up in Acushnet, which was also the name of the ship on which Herman Melville went to sea before writing Moby-Dick. He had an abiding love of Melville, and in his younger photos I always see Rene as Billy Budd, the sensitive youth fighting to survive in a claustrophobic environment full of Catholic torment, gratuitous violence, and sublimated homosexuality.

Rene told me the defining moment of his life was seeing a Warhol flower painting at the Boston ICA in 1966. "I sat in front of that painting for two hours and plotted out my entire life." When Warhol came to Boston for the opening he shot several reels of the Chelsea Girls at the Cambridge apartment of Ed Hood, who was a close friend of Rene's. Rene appears in the film, sitting silently on the bed, peeling and eating a grapefruit slowly enough to fill the 20-minute reel. I can say without irony the performance is riveting.

Unlike most poets who were happy to give readings and attend each other's, Rene hated to do either, so his appearances were rare. When he did read he usually arrived at the last minute (extremely high) and left immediately after. He let it be known that for him poetry readings were poor and *déclassé*, and anything less than a fancy cocktail party on the Upper East Side was well below his dignity. There were, however, a few memorable readings, such as the one Rene shared with his then-boyfriend. Between the time the reading was booked and the evening it took place Rene and the young man had split up, and Rene had composed a long hate poem filled with the most embarrassing sexual details recounted in excruciating detail, which he recited with his friend's parents sitting in the front row. This was typical of Rene: he was our Catullus, writing elegant and obscene poems of love and hate with brevity and dispatch. But maybe it was best to avoid him?

Finally I met Rene at Allen Ginsberg's apartment during one of my first visits to New York in 1978. I was 21, he was 31. I gave him my address and the next day he woke



The exterior of 190 Bowery, at Spring Street. Credit Willie Davis for The New York Times

me up banging on my basement window that faced the street. He had a plan: he'd agreed to write an essay for Pace Gallery and wanted to collect the \$10,000 advance. We went up to West 57th Street and waited for the gallery to open. A check was written with a letter to the bank manager and a few minutes later Rene had \$10,000 in cash. We immediately went to the Russian Tea Room for bellinis, caviar, and vodka. The bill was \$900. From there we visited the Charivari boutique where he bought \$900 worth of Jean Paul Gaultier underwear. The day went on in this manner, and early the next morning I dropped him at the men's homeless shelter on the Bowery—penniless.

Several days later I ran into him and inquired about the underwear, which for some reason was the thing that day that really impressed me. It had been stolen. He'd washed it and placed it out to dry on a park bench and when he woke up it was gone.

I realized I had met one of the extraordinary figures I'd always read about: Villon, Poe, Nerval. The classic *poète maudit* who lived by a crazy economy that involved throwing something away as soon one possessed it. Yet throughout the day he repaid loans, treated his poorer friends lavishly, and in general lived like the ruined aristocrat that he was—an esoteric French count fallen on hard times. It is difficult to describe the fierceness of the man from this distance.

Despite that picaresque first day, it took me about four years to win him over. Contempt, disdain, and mistrust were standard with him. As I got to know him better and he told me about the beatings and sexual abuse he'd grown up with since the age of eight, his defensiveness became more understandable. The animal instinct to strike out was always just below the surface, and did not take much to scratch. It was only after I'd edited two volumes of John Wieners's work, and told Rene I held his work in the same esteem, that he began to warm to me a little.

One thing we shared from the start was our Massachusetts background. He liked the fact that I knew of his hometown of Acushnet, a tiny farming village not far from Cape Cod. Rene prized the local, and with our statehood pride we often used to laugh about Robert Creeley insisting he was not from Acton but West Acton—a distance of about half a mile. Hawthorne, Thoreau, Melville, Longfellow, Dickinson: Rene's literary pantheon was likewise local. When the Library of America began publishing their remarkable series Rene pointed out to me that 19 of the 21 writers from the 19th century were born within a 75 mile radius of Boston.

Rene's feminine and extravagant side was always a problem for him growing up. His book *God With Revolver* describes a scene where he was raped and molested by one of his older brothers and his gang of friends. An unpublished late poem, "In Daddy's Hand" describes the violence he lived with as a child. His father was a drinker and gambler: if he won at cards or the horses they would dine on lobster, if he lost there was nothing to eat. Often in the winter there was no money to pay for the oil heat. Mother and children were regularly beaten. Eventually the father went to jail for life on a murder charge. He was found dead by one of his sons, who was also in prison, and he in turn died at home on the sofa of a drug overdose on his mother's birthday. Aside from his mother Pauline,

whom he adored, he never mentioned the family. Once he thought he saw a brother on the street in New York and he spent two weeks hiding in his room, refusing to go out. After he died and I cleared his room I found several touching letters from nieces and nephews reaching out to him on the topic of art or poetry. I don't think the letters were ever answered. Some were never opened.

"So many years and so few poems," was what Warhol said to him in his fey but acerbic way at the book party for Rene's first book. But Rene was not the prolific type. The poems were condensed, intense, and few. Some were lost due to his disarranged life, but he also had the good sense to always leave copies with (mostly) responsible friends. And when he hit on the idea of making poems/paintings, the writing had a much higher survival rate.

But it was really the Artforum articles of the early 1980s, on Schnabel, Haring, and Basquiat, that put Rene on center stage. (The world owes a considerable debt still unacknowledged to his editor Ingrid Sischy.) Importantly, the dynamic had changed between Rene and his artists. He was now their elder and they were his students. Not since Apollinaire and the Cubists was a poet able to stand on the shoulders of his audience and explain the vast terrain. No longer mere publicist or court jester, Rene was now teacher and mentor, and he loved the role because it meant his vast body of arcane art historical knowledge could be channeled into contemporary works. It made him feel useful, which is pretty much all anyone wants in life.

No artist made better use of what Rene had to offer than Jean Michel Basquiat. Rene saw his work on the street and at the home of friends, and sought him out. His remarkable work of agitprop on Julian Schnabel had just appeared in Artforum. At their first meeting Jean said, "Can you put me in the ring with Schnabel?" "I'll lace up your gloves," Rene replied.

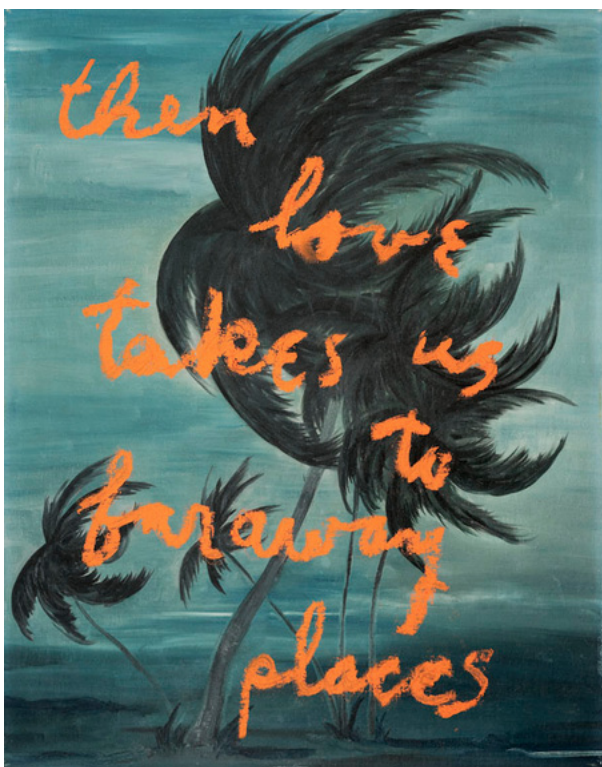
Someday an important essay could be written on the borrowings from classical Greek and Roman art in Basquiat's painting—it is a constant hidden subtext in his work. Jean had numerous 19th-century illustrated histories of Hellenistic and Roman art crammed with engraved illustrations from which he borrowed heavily. Rene was always present to explain and discuss the illustrations, the influence and power these works held for artists through the centuries. No one soaked up Rene's

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knowledge more than Jean. In those days Rene always had a key to Jean's loft on Crosby Street and frequently crashed there when Jean was out of town. At one point Jean telephoned from the Caribbean where he was staying with a girlfriend. Rene was effusive over a remarkable drawing based on the Apollo Belvedere. "I'll give it to you if you haven't stolen it already," Jean told him.

For most of the 1980s Rene lived a crack and heroin-fueled life. One only encountered him by chance, usually in a state of great disarray if not outright derangement. Sightings were reported between friends. On a sleepover at the Schnabel house, the Clemente twins were sitting on the front steps at one in the morning—their first late night away from home. Suddenly Rene came stumbling down the street, a bottle of champagne in one hand and a bag from McDonald's in the other. "We hid under the steps till he went by," they told me.

was not something he could conceive of. "You mean once as in one year?" he asked in all seriousness.) It had to do with that crazy sense of measure he brought to all things, in spite of his excess. I often think of the Charlie Chaplin film where the poor tramp is taken into the mansion by the millionaire who thinks he's found his long lost brother. The butler offers a bowl of sugar cubes and Chaplin drops about 17 into his coffee—before breaking the last one in half.



Untitled, 2013. Archival ink jet print, 30.5 x 24".



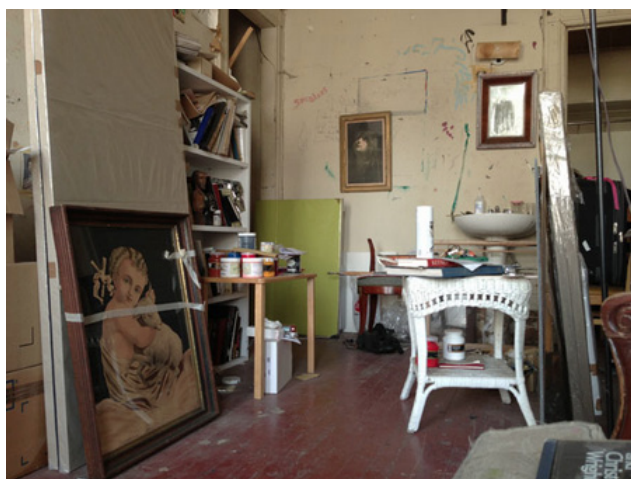
"Eros," 2009. Gouache on inkjet print, 7.5 x 11".

Rene's appetite for drugs was gargantuan, and the fact that he never overdosed or was killed still amazes me. (Once he asked me if I'd ever used a certain drug and I said "once." The idea that one could use a drug only once

Rene's 1989 book *God With Revolver* was culled from manuscripts that I'd carefully collected over the previous decade. We edited the book in one day at Henry Geldzahler's house at 33 West 9th Street. Rene spent

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most of the day smoking a crack pipe and having sex with a Times Square hustler in the bathroom. At one point Gregory Corso stopped by. "I've never smoked crack," he said. "I hear you get hooked the first time you do it." "So what's wrong with that," Rene replied, "you just do it for the rest of your life." Gregory accepted the pipe. "So, your Literary Parnassus has quickly devolved to a crack party," Rene said to me with a sneer.



Room 921, Chelsea Hotel, February 1, 2014.

During this period Rene's behavior at parties and events became so unruly the invitations began to dwindle, and this seemed to be one of the few consequences of this lifestyle that concerned him. In his paranoia he began to suspect the invitations he did receive were being sent to keep him from attending other, more important events. He referred to these as "decoy" invitations and quickly threw them out.

Since he gave very few readings, art openings were one of the few places one could encounter him. He always entered a room with great drama and flourish and left just as suddenly. He had devised the perfect response to hapless artists who asked him to do a studio visit: "Sure, \$5,000." End of discussion. Except for one wealthy artist who actually accepted the offer. "How was the visit?" I asked him afterwards. "The best they ever had," he said, laughing.

By the mid 1990s Rene had secured an apartment in the Chelsea Hotel and things slowly normalized, to the extent that word could be applied to him at all. Ironically he was

given a room immediately next door to his archenemy, the writer Victor Bockris. Victor still carried a prominent scar on his cheek from a champagne glass Rene shoved into his face at Max's Kansas City two decades earlier. Rene's rent was \$1,000 a month. One day as I was passing through the lobby I heard him in discussion with Stanley Bard, the hotel manager. Stanley was pointing out that Rene was four months overdue on the rent, and Rene was explaining that he only paid the rent once a year, because it was easier for him to raise \$12,000 once a year than \$1,000 every month. It made sense to me but wasn't going over very well with the manager.

His small room was number 921: bed, sink, dresser, bookshelf, closet. A small space by the window to paint by the northern light. The bathroom was in the hall outside. One day he wanted to attend a Robert Creeley reading and asked me to pick him up on my way. At 7 p.m. I knocked several times and then pushed the door open. Books, papers, and garbage were piled three feet high. Burnt-out candles were propped on books, on the wooden tabletop, on the windowsills. Rene was sprawled out asleep on the bed in a magnificent three-piece Italian suit given him by Gregor Von Rezzori's widow. We barely managed to get to the reading on time, and Creeley read his marvelous poem, "For Rene Ricard" in tribute. The next day Robert told me how pleased he was that Rene had taken the trouble to wear a beautiful suit to his reading. I didn't have the heart to tell Robert he woke up that way.



RR, 2010. Photo by Rita Barros.

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As his downstairs neighbor at the hotel, I gradually slipped into a comfortable (even domestic) friendship with him. Seeing Rene was always thrilling: his very presence was eventful. He would arrive with social news, or a new poem, or a new insight into a favorite painting. And there was always the wardrobe. The poetry aside, when I think of Rene it's the clothes I remember most. "To understand fashion you must understand the 18th century," he once said to me, and I'm sure he kept this in mind when he dressed. I've never seen anyone wear clothes as well as Rene, and I always looked forward to bumping into him for this reason—it was like being handed a bouquet of fresh flowers. Velvet dinner jackets from Sulka, magnificently cut, worn with embroidered carpet slippers. Donegal tweed suits with silk cravats. A lime green Hermes jumpsuit with matching designer sunglasses. Or he'd suddenly adopt a nautical style (French, of course): Breton striped jersey and a mariner's beret topped with an impossibly large pompom. One could easily be treated to all of these costumes within a single week—and always in color combinations unthought of, before or since. Even on the rare occasions when I'd encounter him on West 23rd Street in pajamas and slippers, walking back from the Aristocrat Deli with his late morning coffee and muffin, he was a spectacle of perfect style. Or should I say especially then.

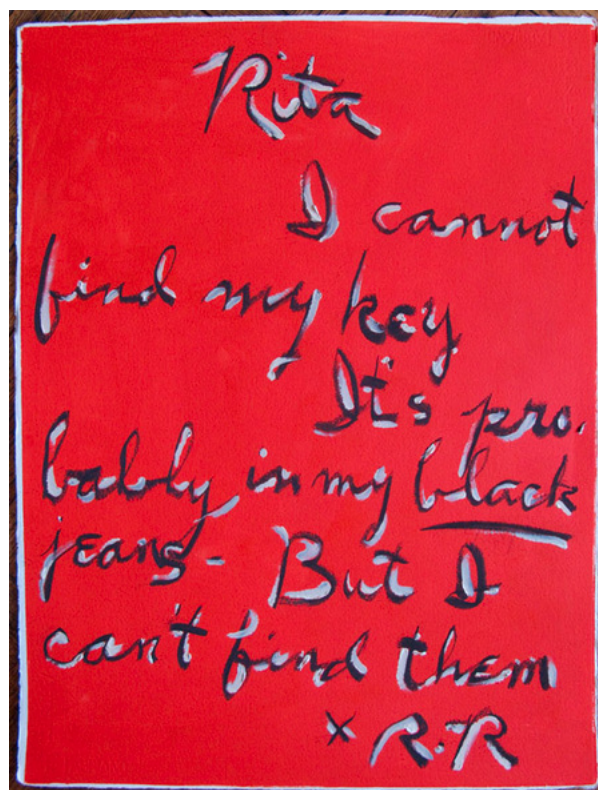


RR's Hydra notebook, 2012.

Rene disliked the fancier cafes in the neighborhood. He preferred a little bakery and coffee shop on the corner of 23rd and Eighth Avenue that he sometimes called "my office." He also enjoyed the benches outside a few of the local restaurants. People-watching was a favorite activity

and he especially loved to observe the old ladies in the neighborhood, their dress, hats, manners, and style. He once said to me, "When you see an old lady in New York City, she's not just any old lady. She was a showgirl!" He shared that similar strength and courage, the sense that one should dress well as a courtesy to others, to face each day with a sense of style and dignity. Rene's all-too-brief life as a senior citizen was one of the more beautiful and unlikely transitions I have ever witnessed.

Often Rene would drop by my apartment in the early evening and I'd be listening to old opera records. Rene loved the opera and knew all the classic singers: Mary Garden, Dame Nellie Melba, Amelita Galli-Curci, Bidu Sayão. He would sing along to the recordings, warbling and laughing with hysterical joy. Most of these singers



"Untitled (Rita I cannot find my key...)," 2010. Acrylic/charcoal on paper, 24 x 18". Collection of Rita Barros.

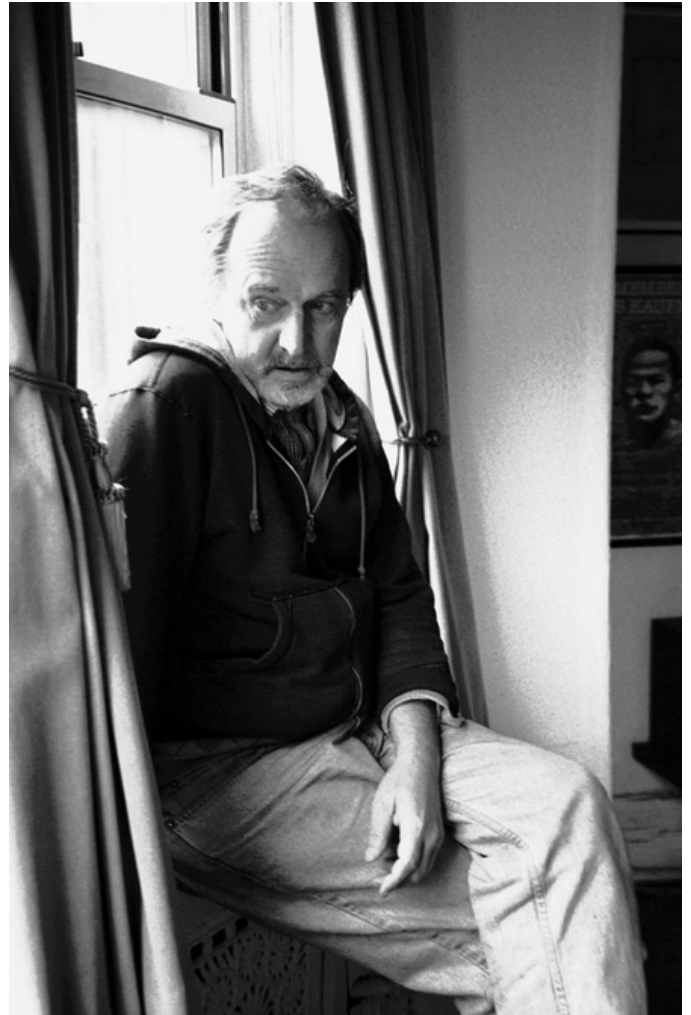
have written wonderful autobiographies and of course he'd read them all. He could discuss the gossip surrounding these singers and their amorous conquests, often cross-referenced with passages from the memoirs of Casanova, Berlioz, or Delacroix. His involvement with

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music (like most everything) was intensely physical. I remember him sitting on the edge of his seat, listening to Friedrich Gulda's breathtaking recording of the Beethoven Waldstein sonata, shrieking with delight at every twist and turn. "It's like a great silent movie soundtrack!"



Altered advertising sign, Lower East Side, NYC, 2014. This graffiti began appearing a few days after RR's death.



RR, Chelsea Hotel Room 814, 2002. Photo by Raymond Foye.

I found it odd that for someone who loved music as much as he did, he never owned any type of player. I decided to give him a portable CD player with headphones, and a few Maria Callas CDs—Callas's emotional pitch in extremis was his ideal. He carried the CD player and headphones with him everywhere. One day as we were exiting a cab the device fell out of his pocket and as he put his foot on the pavement he stepped directly on it, smashing it to pieces—a flawless bit of slapstick only he was capable of. I offered to replace it but he refused. "I've had it for three months and I haven't written a single poem. I have to get rid of it." It was then I realized that much of the poverty and denial he lived with was about eliminating all distractions so he could practice his art.

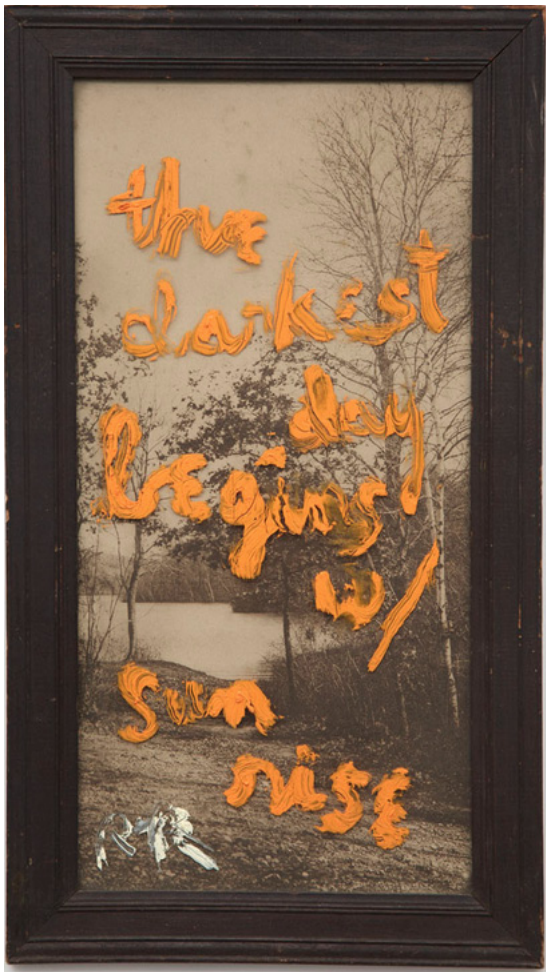
At the top of his list of favorite music were the operas of George Frideric Handel and Henry Purcell, works he knew intimately. He loved French song, in particular Suzanne Graham's recital of the songs of Reynaldo Hahn and the classic recording of the Chants d'Auvergne sung by Madeleine Grey. He loved lyric tenors Tito Schipa, Hugues Cuénod, and Nicolai Gedda. He loved the ballads of the British Isles and their American counterparts; the first two Joan Baez albums were favorites for this reason. One recording I put him on to was Sviatoslav Richter's remarkable 1987 Mantova recital of the Haydn piano sonatas. He played it dozens of times, essentially memorizing it.

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Rene's depth of knowledge in the history of art made any museum visit with him a near-psychedelic experience. (After an afternoon at the Frick a young friend of mine referred to him as "a chain-smoking encyclopedia.") He possessed a photographic memory for artworks in virtually all subjects and styles from pre-history to the

historical figure, even a minor one, he could describe their biography in detail—not overlooking personal intrigue or sexual scandal. He knew the natural history behind every color, their origins, trade, chemical properties. His knowledge of the history of costumes and style was exhaustive and he could likewise describe the techniques by which the garments were woven and sewn. He could choose an isolated subject—the history of lace for example—and easily discourse for an hour, never pausing for a moment to recall the correct phrase for a technique that had not been employed for 200 years. In rare cases when the clothes the subject was wearing still existed, he had usually visited the costume institute to examine them in person. Because we lived a few blocks away from the Fashion Institute, we would always visit the marvelous exhibitions there. An exhibition on the history of perfume unlocked a belle epoch reverie of Proustian dimensions. That was a four-hour visit.

Rene read avidly and he was never without a book. His favorite author was Marcel Proust and he would talk about the characters as if they were people he'd known.



"Untitled (Walden Pond)," 2010. Found object and acrylic on glass. 18.5 x 10.5".



"Untitled," 2010. Found object and acrylic on glass. 9.5 x 13".

present, but the Renaissance was his true love, with French baroque not far behind. He could tell you where the artist was born and who they studied with. He could tell you where the painting was made; who purchased it first and for how much, and its subsequent provenance and history of restoration. He had a conservator's knowledge of supports, grounds, primers, pigments, etc., and most of these techniques he had practiced himself as an amateur. When the subject of the painting was a

He always said the one thing no one ever tells you about Proust is how funny he is. (Once on a long train ride he proposed a game: we would write down every reference to famous paintings in Proust. I came up with 12, he came up with well over 100.) He loved mysteries, royal biographies, court memoirs, maritime histories, travel guides. British comedies of manners were high on his list: Oscar Wilde, P.G. Wodehouse, E. F. Benson. He'd committed to memory much of Ronald Firbank and loved to act out favorite

scenes. He read almost everything on the Kennedys. (An illustrated biography of Jacqueline Onassis was the last book he read in the hospital.) Over the years I was fascinated by items he used as bookmarks: coffee cup lids, bandages, twenty dollar bills, a piece of bread, coins, cigarettes (smoked and not).

When Rene would visit my room he'd often spy an expensive art book he'd want to borrow. Lending him a book often meant one would never see it again. But I never had the heart to refuse him the loan because he devoured them with such incendiary intelligence. He would argue with books the way he'd argue with people and eventually I encouraged (and in some cases paid) him to annotate them. But after he lost my copy of Colin Eisler's monograph on Giovanni Bellini and I learned replacement copies started at \$600, I instituted a system whereby he had to leave a book of equal or greater value in the event he failed to return the one he borrowed. Rene referred to these as "hostage books." Several of his composition books in my collection I acquired in this way.

He wrote mostly in notebooks and carried favorite ones around for months at a time. This always caused me anxiety, because I knew how much great poetry was between those covers, and how likely he was to lose it. I asked to borrow a notebook for an hour, so I could xerox the contents and keep them safe, but he flatly refused: "You don't understand a poet's mojo" he said disdainfully. Another time I begged him to put his name and address in the flyleaf of an especially important notebook, knowing full well he would do nothing so mundane. A few days later I peeked inside; scrawled in that extravagant hand were these four words: "If Lost, Please Find."

Eventually Rene's Chelsea Hotel room became too crowded and he began to enjoy the company of his upstairs neighbor Rita Barros. Soon he moved in with her, sleeping on the sofa and unobtrusively setting up camp in little corners of her living room. And there he stayed for the next 10 years. Until he awoke on the first of January 2014 and was unable to get out of bed. He'd had trouble walking for a few weeks and thought he'd pulled a muscle. It was clear he needed medical attention so a trip to Bellevue Hospital followed. When I saw him there a few days later he offered words of advice: don't go to Bellevue on January 1st, it's full of New Years Eve casualties: stabbings, falls, alcohol poisoning, etc., It took 10 hours to be seen by the

doctors. X-rays revealed a fractured femur requiring a partial hip replacement. Then closer scans the following day revealed a significant tumor on his lungs. The cancer had also spread to his bones, spine, brain, and lymphatic system. I stood by his bedside as the doctors delivered this grim report. He listened silently, then looked up at me. "I'm dead," he said, matter-of-factly.

He adjusted well to the ups and downs of the hospital routine. Pokings, probings, scans, physical indignities, boorish roommates. The room filled up with flowers and friends. The outpouring of affection and expressions of love sustained everyone. I wanted to ask him in those days what he thought about death. The question could really never be approached. He was still too full of life. But one snowy Saturday afternoon, his sole visitor, he asked me to sit on the edge of the bed. He began to discuss dynastic Egypt—one of his favorite subjects. For over an hour he detailed the monetary system, daily life, social strata, farming, navigation, and eventually their ideas on death and burial. He discussed Charos and the River Styx, and the migration of that myth to Greece and Rome. It was a rapturous monologue, whispered in a rapid delivery. When he was finished he told me he was exhausted and asked me to leave. Walking home in the snow, I felt I'd somehow received my answer.

One morning a perky hospital worker came by to ask Rene a series of tedious questions for which he was in no mood. A perky and typically clueless American type, she ran down her list of questions. Rene could barely manage a whisper. Answered her questions with a marvelous mixture of courtesy and deprecation:

You're a writer?
 "I'm a poet."
 How wonderful!
 (Withering look.)
 What's the last year of school you completed?
 "Eighth grade."
 Your name is Albert. They call you Rene?
 "It's my professional name."
 What's your religion?
 "My own."
 What are your hobbies?
 (Horried look.) "Hobbies?"
 Yeah, like, what do you do for fun?
 Long pause, thinking, smiles. "Poetry."

Certain deaths in the New York art world seem seismic. John Wieners noted that with Frank O'Hara's passing in the '60s, "a certain tone of town was gone." After Andy died the entire club culture faced a crisis it never recovered from. "What's the point of going to a club if Andy's not going to be there?" a friend of mine said. I feel Rene's passing in this way. How strange the Factory poster boy of self-destruction should outlive nearly his entire retinue.

The headline to his New York Times obituary referred to him as "Art Arbiter with Wildean Wit." Nothing would have pleased him more. Arbiter is Petronius. Wilde his hero. Wit his most revered quality. "Andy was a great wit, people don't understand that," he once said to me sadly. In fact, being in the presence of another great wit was the only thing that could neutralize him.

In the numerous memorials that followed his death a strange pattern emerged in people's history with Rene: not only was he the defining figure in our lives in New York, but a remarkable number of us met him the very first day we arrived in New York. It was as if he were out there waiting for us, in whatever the junkie equivalent is of the Welcome Wagon hostess.

For so many years Rene was always the problem child, the bad boy, the enfant terrible. But gathered amongst a hundred or more of his friends crowded into his memorial service a few days after his death we all felt the same numbing grief: we were his students, and we'd lost our great teacher. Death had revealed Rene's higher purpose, and it had been a deadly serious one all along, only disguised as fun. Serious fun.