

## **Art Agency, Partners**

Art Agency, Partners is a bespoke art advisory firm founded in 2014, and built upon decades of combined experience, to provide counsel to many of the world's leading art collectors and institutions on collection assessment and development, estate planning, and innovative approaches to museum giving and growth.

---

## **Half Mast**

## **On the Protest Paintings**



Courtesy Richard Prince

By  Richard Prince

artist

Published 6 July 2017 in [Other Insights](#)

An excerpt from "Tell Me Everything", a memoir I'm writing... something that probably won't see the light of day... but who knows? First I have to deal with trying to get thru the next 20 years to even finish the fucker...

1970? (I'm bad with dates)... I'm a junior in college... avoiding the draft, in Springvale Maine. The college is Nasson College... a real shit hole, mostly for losers who couldn't get accepted anywhere else or just decided not to apply to other colleges because they were too lazy to leave their neighborhood and comfort of their own bedrooms. But I've discovered since I've been hiding out there, an amazing small art program located "off-campus" in a carriage house that I've managed to work my way into and make sense out of and take advantage of and help turn me onto the side effects of something that I can hardly believe.

But then this happened...

I kind of got tripped up and found myself outside of what had become my small private art world on May 4<sup>th</sup> 1970.

Kent State.

Everybody was freaking out about the Kent State shootings. I had pretty much stayed away from any political commitment. I had grown tired of hippies protesting the war and then coming home after the protest at 4:30 in the afternoon to listen to their Neil Young albums. (Never trust a hippie).

I didn't give a shit about what the government was trying to put down. For me, I had already come around to thinking Gauguin's paintings were a political statement. Painting beauty was where it was at. I mean... can anybody tell me who the president of France was when Gauguin was off painting his beautiful paintings in Tahiti? I thought so...

But the Kent State shootings were different. That got to me. The shootings pissed me off and I found myself wandering around the campus trying to come to terms with the murder. Nixon and Agnew were shitheads and already dead people to me. I really thought they were going to try to stage some kind of coup and take over the government. I was ready to pack it up and retreat to the upper parts of the Adirondacks... put a hold on "beauty" and work out and get in shape, stockpile supplies, turn on the ham radio, do some reconnaissance, get camouflaged and ambush, (hit and run)... and guerrilla the shit out of the republican army.

Instead...

After more wandering I found myself sitting on the stone wall that surrounded the flagpole which was planted in the middle of the campus. I'm not sure why, but I decided to lower the flag to half-mast. It was a spontaneous action. There was no thought to the gesture. It was probably just that... a gesture. A way of coping with the murdered students. I don't know. It seemed like something that needed to be done. There was no one around and I just got up and did it. I untangled the rope that was fixed to the cleat and lowered the stars and stripes. What did I know about patriotism? The only thing I knew about flags was that Jasper Johns painted them.

What happen next was surprising, maybe even bizarre. Students started coming out of their dorms and came over to the "quad" and stood there... silently. More came. In a minute or two it seemed like the whole student body showed up. It was like a congregation standing still with heads bowed down. I half expected them to get down on their knees and start praying. What was it I had just done?

The campus police showed up and then the real police. Officials from the administration arrived. The president of the college was called. ("The vice-presidents gone mad. When? Last night. Where? Downtown. Gee, that's too bad"... Just so you know that's not me, that's Dylan from the Basement Tapes)

The police asked who lowered the flag. I said, "I did". (I wasn't fingered, I volunteered the information).

I was told to "come with us".

I was escorted to the president's office and questioned by the president himself.

He seemed like the kind of guy that would rather be off campus somewhere doing anything but running the day to day affairs of a college. He was the definition of a dick.

This was a "hassle" for him. What I did was apparently confusing to him. I don't think anybody knew if what I did was exactly against the law. But what I did wasn't something I was told I should "get away with".

The taking over of "our flag" was against the rules. And if it wasn't it should be. "Private property." "Off-limits"... "Son, there are some things you just don't touch."

He was struggling to make me see that what I did was something that I shouldn't have done. His struggle was useless. What I had done had nothing to do with his "god and country". I could give a shit about his god, his country.

He asked me again why I did it.

I sat there, silent.

He spoke.

"Don't you know that a flag at half mast means honoring the dead." "It fucking stands for something". (I don't know if he used the word "fucking"...but he was clearly upset and was trying to rattle me with his outrage). He started babbling on about the "state of affairs".

"dignity" and "national mourning".

I wanted to say you're talking to the wrong guy about "regulations" "respect" and "good government bullshit"...but I kept my mouth shut. I should have quoted Marcel Duchamp... "Can one make art that is not a work of art"? I should have buzzed him with some jive and rap from Lord Buckley... messed his mind and shined his eyes... but I was way too new and unformed to think about "indifference" or be defined as "meta-ironic". (Shit... I don't think I even knew who Duchamp or Lord Buckley was).

I just wanted to split and get my ass out of the big wooden chair they had me sitting in and get back to the art studio and disappear and blend in.

Instead I was hauled down to the Sanford police station, arrested, fingerprinted, and had my mug shot taken. I was put in a jail cell with other scumbags, lowlifes and wankers. I tried to keep my chin up. I kept singing to myself the lyrics to Arlo Guthrie's Alice's Restaurant. ("You can get anything you want at Alice's Restaurant").

My arrest warrant stated that I had "interfered with government property". In other words they didn't know what the fuck I did.

While in custody I heard from one of the police officers that the campus was on "lockdown" and that there were a "good number" of students trashing their dorm rooms.

"There's a riot going on".

I was being referred to as "the ring leader".

Is this some kind of joke?

That's what went thru my mind.

I didn't want to lead anything.

(Even back then collaboration gave me a stomachache. I was a loner. Anti-social. To me that Three Dog Night song about the "number one" being lonely was wrong.

I made bail and scrambled. I didn't even make it back to the parking lot of the campus. I avoided any applause and pats on the back and made it over the border to New Hampshire and phoned an uncle who was a janitor at UNH and camped in his garage and tried to make sense of the sudden glare of the limelight.

(Recognition can sometimes be the anti-Christ).

New Hampshire.

Live Free Or Die.

That's what it said on the states license plate.

(I was thinking maybe I'd be making them soon).

I was still pretty much shaken up by the National Guard opening up on innocent civilians who thought they had inalienable rights. The picture of the woman kneeling next to a student's dead body with her arms and hands outstretched would soon be seared into my senses and become one of the icons of that terrible afternoon.

Way to go, Ohio.

I needed to find a way to bring the flag all the way down.

All the way would mean finding my own beauty, on my own island.

Maybe I should check out Manhattan. There's a place there called Soho. South of Houston. I'd read about it in the magazine section of the NY Times. About how a crappy industrial neighborhood full of burned out cast iron buildings (lofts) was suddenly taken over by "squatters and creative types". The picture accompanying the article showed two girls and a guy outside of a restaurant they "cobbled together". The name of the restaurant they were standing in front of was called Food. That was it. Simple, direct. Almost a no name. Maybe I could start there. Go down for three months and check out all the hullabaloo... sign up under a different Uncle Sam.

I'd have to ignore my parole and jump bail. I'd be a minor fugitive...wanted or "almost" wanted... a small time hood. But the numbers were on my side. New York was a big place... a "melting pot"... a place an artist could get lost in and start over. Take on a new identity, a fresh start, a clean slate. "I never had a penny to my name, so I changed my name".

So that's what I'll do.

I'll go and paint the protest.

*\*This was first published by [Skarstedt](#) for Richard Prince's exhibition "Protest Paintings" (October 15-December 20, 2013)*