

RICHARD



MORRISON



Richard Morrison

1948-2015

DIE

January 3 - January 31, 2018

steven harvey fine art projects

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FRONT COVER: *steps*, n.d., silver gelatin print, 10½ x 10½ inches

INSIDE COVER: *street*, n.d., from black and white xerox

ABOVE: *untitled (a marriage)*, silver gelatin print, 11 x 14 inches



Richard Morrison (self-portrait)
color laser print, 11 x 8½ inches

Richard Morrison was an enigma. The works he created were unforgettable and jarringly distinct from one another, as if each one had exhausted a technique and summarized a way of seeing. There are legible threads connecting his drawings, ink paintings, photographs and videos, but these are less material tropes than spoors of a shared sensibility: arch, abstemious, subtly assertive, graceful, poetic, and, to the trained viewer, bleakly comical. Richard specialized in small, seemingly modest gestures that take a while to sink in, that on close inspection prove hilariously over the top—like the blunt, U-shaped marker strokes stabbed across a queasy gray-blue background littered with muted linear scars: an earnest viewer could speculate endlessly about the formal nuances of this piece, but the simple title, *dick*, really yanks it into the least vaporous kind of coherence.

His art was rarely shown, if not rarely produced. It was almost private, really: a secret he shared with friends, sometimes surprising us with richly cryptic black and white photographs in delicately ornamented cardboard frames, photos of ourselves, of our friends, photos we didn't know he'd taken on the sly, with great discretion. A gift of this kind from Richard was a declaration of love and loyalty. It was something to treasure till the end. It showed that he thought about you when you weren't there. These photos were never ordinary portraits but always pictured their subject in a characteristic but visually unusual posture—the raised shoulder, for example, of Bill Rice, his face hidden, as he peers down into the viewfinder of a Rolleiflex camera. Richard's diffidence when presenting these gifts gave me a faint twinge of guilt, though that was hardly his



untitled (dick)
n.d., marker on paper, 17 x 14 inches

intention. I felt that perhaps I took Richard for granted, didn't try as hard as I should to know him better. Eventually I understood, or thought I did, that Richard was entirely his own person, that he liked me to be at the exact near distance that I was, that coming closer might disrupt various delicate arrangements he and his partner, Larry Mitchell, enjoyed between themselves, and with other people.

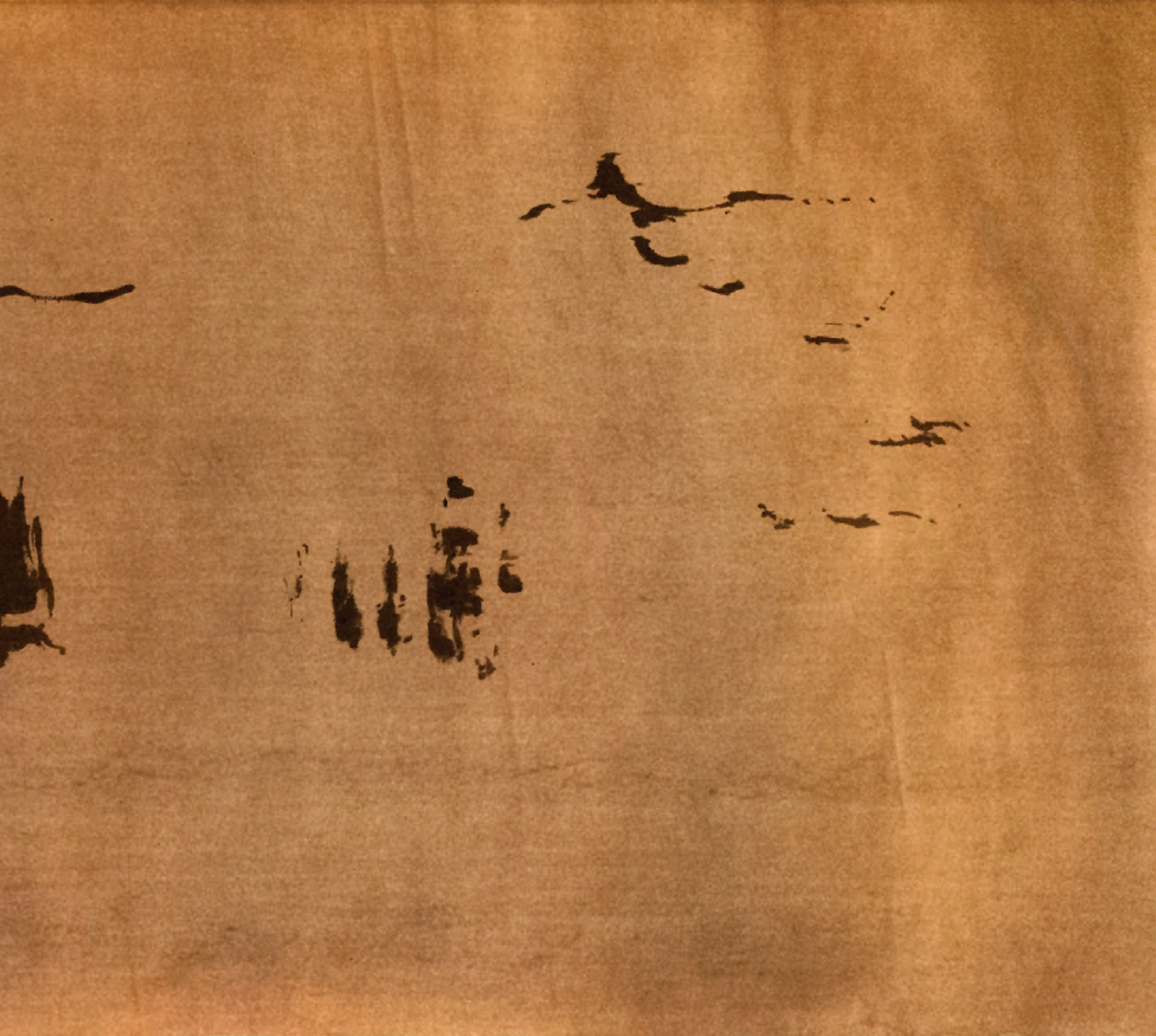
Although I spent hundreds of hours with him over many years, and we shared innumerable blitzed, bizarre experiences with friends who coagulated nightly at Bill Rice's studio on East 3rd Street, or at The Bar on 2nd Avenue and 4th, back when the East Village was a sparsely inhabited, bohemian pub crawl, I seldom gleaned any firm insight into what went on Richard's head. I only knew it was more highly developed and reflective than many people realized. He smoked a lot of weed and had a slight, stoned, utterly harmless fuck-up side to his personality that perhaps obscured his brilliance on first acquaintance. Yet he was brilliantly lucid. The weed simply heightened his perception of most conversation as banality wrapped in bullshit. Not that he always made sense; none of us did. It was a time when you could let go of making sense when you felt like it.



untitled (mountain), hand colored photograph, 14 x 11 inches



Paris Riots, 1968, photostat, 22 x 52 inches



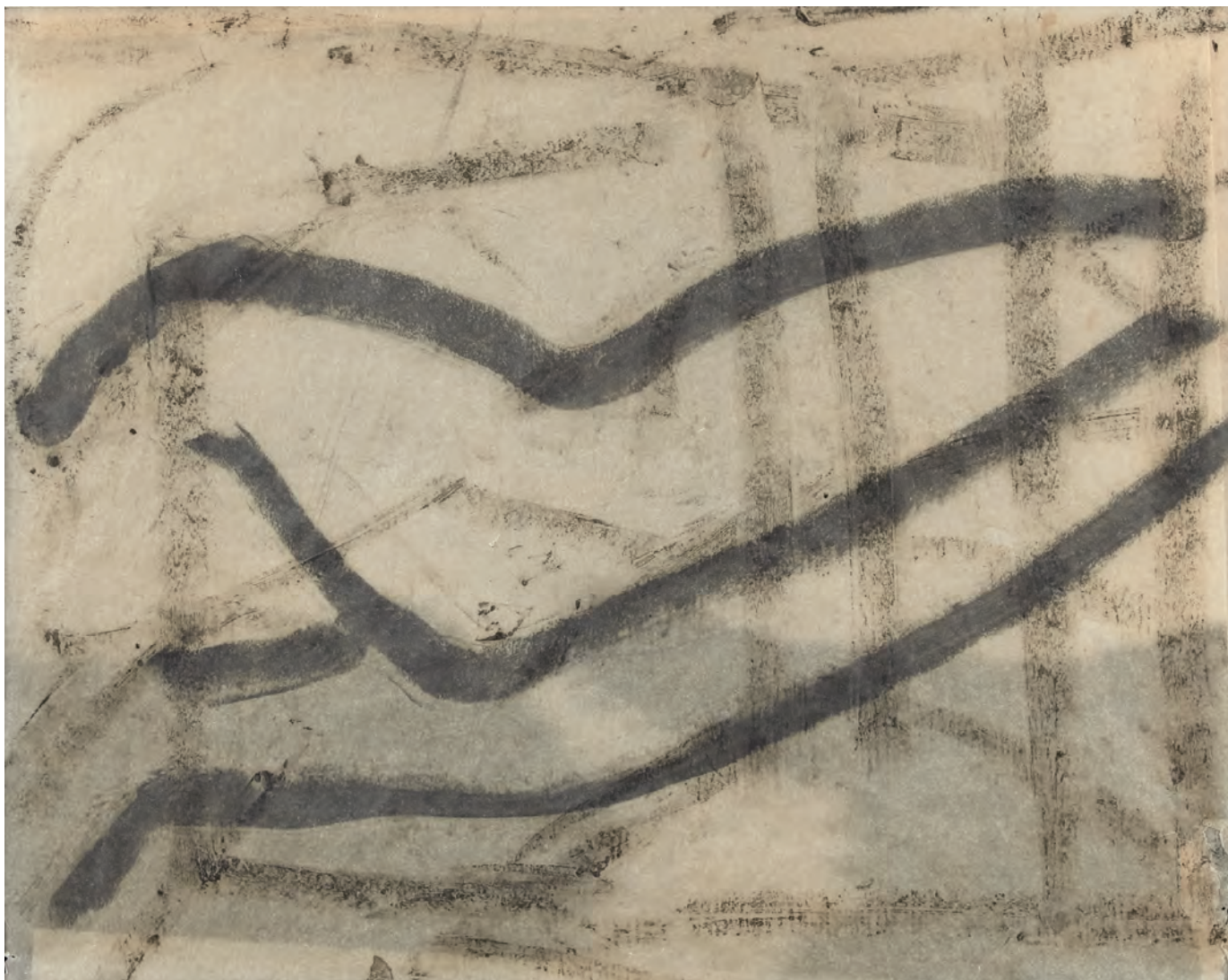
He was unpredictable in his enthusiasms and highly eclectic in his tastes. He had very rarefied, superior taste in the arts and in people, which meant he mixed in the underground circles of Jeff Weiss's storefront theater, Princess Pamela's Soul Food emporium, The 82 Club, LaMama Theater, Bill Rice's studio, and all the other, enchantedly sordid pleasure spots tucked away in our little quadrant of Manhattan, during the few years when we could consider the neighborhood "ours." Richard listened closely to what people told him, and also clearly heard what they didn't tell him. An infallible judge of character, and degrees of insanity. He had an aloof, even spectral quality, despite his lanky, sinewy tallness, dark hooded eyes, crypto-villainous mustache and sharply etched features, the high-slicked black hair that gave him the look of a Mafia cousin training as a bagman. He kept himself to himself, as the saying goes, yet did so within a very avid, frenetic social circle of artists, writers, and performers during the 70s and early 80s, pitching in when a set needed building or a costume adjusted or lights re-hung, residing for some years in the Agaloff Towers on Avenue A with his life partner, the writer Larry Mitchell. Richard himself was as laconic as a Trappist monk, and his reticent self-presentation made the powerful effect of his work register as a kind of shock.

At some juncture in the middle '80s, well in the depths of the AIDS epidemic that knocked off our friends one after another on a daily basis for several years, Richard and Larry shifted to Ithaca, near Cornell. They kept the apartment at Agaloff Towers, but were less and less in residence there; I was told that they'd bought a Carnegie mansion, presumably at a drastic discount. I sometimes saw them when they were "in town," but now their lives were palpably elsewhere. I never visited them in Ithaca, though others did, so have no real notion of their lives there. Still, when I saw them, I felt the distance hadn't weakened our bond of friendship, and always hoped Richard was still making work, though I was afraid to ask. Of course he was.

His work often reflects a sense of devastation that had to have been an important aspect of his inner life. His pictures on vellum suggest the struggle involved in making them, or seem to, their surfaces dappled by ghostly underimages and nebulous, shadowy masses. The extreme refinement of a linear piece such as *Longnook/Ballston* indicates a vastness of stuff—cerebral as well as visual stuff—that's been pared away and hacked through to arrive at a line, a mark, a fading veil of color—in this instance, in fact, one of the artist's most stark and effective photographs has been painted over in oils, like an epoch of time superimposed on the past.

Many of his pictures refer to the sea, to landscapes, I would venture, where the artist found moments of peace and, possibly, happiness.

It's often impossible to tell exactly what is being shown, as if all matter within visual range is in a process of disintegration, or as if something carefully



Longnook/Ballston, 1986, oilstick on vellum over Morrison photograph printed by Peter Hujar, 10½ x 13 inch



ABOVE AND OPPOSITE: *untitled (plaza in mexico)* 2 silver gelatin prints, each 9 ¼ x 9 ¼ inches

hidden resists the artist's effort to fully reveal it. The photographs taken at a plaza in Mexico have the same jittery restiveness as the staccato lines of the drawing *Paris Riots*. What Richard did (I can't refer to him as "Morrison," it's too art write-y) so adroitly in such pieces was to bring the act of witnessing reality into doubt, to demonstrate in several media how ephemeral what we see around us and think we know actually is: I think especially of an oval video portrait he made of David Wojnarowicz, whose image appears constantly on the verge of retracting into darkness. The viewer's effort to keep Wojnarowicz in sight, to not let him disappear, is precisely the kind of effect Richard cultivated in his art, a form of spell-casting that reveals the intensity of a work in a gradual build, taking us beyond and behind the surface to a place where the thing itself pulsates, dissolves, and reconstitutes itself in our retinas.



Much of Richard's work is "abstract" insofar as it's ambiguous: an almost transparent, lingam-shaped lump might be a sail or a body part—it's ostensibly a "mountain"—and a darker, more definite brown streak near one edge of it is probably a human figure, but maybe not; in any case, even his least figural work usually alludes to the human body, or roughly pictures it, in ways that draw us into an awareness of longing and desire, isolation and melancholy. It reeks of sexuality, the blunt carnal connection that liberates us from the stranglehold of everyday contingency—within which we hear a piercing scream of revolt.

His pictures catch a reality continually slipping away, erupting in chaos, fracturing into incoherence; the most disturbing thing about Richard Morrison's work is often that the artist seems as much a hapless spectator of the world he pictures as the viewer is—



untitled, 1992

mixed media on vellum, 16 ¼ x 13 ⅜ inches

sometimes a dire, intolerable realm, where figures drizzle into the surrounding landscape or blur beyond recognition. Objects, people, things are forever slightly out of reach, or, sometimes, violently blunt and immediate. The most conspicuous quality of his images is their pastness—even new, they had the appearance of memory traces, of things and people long lost to time, in recognition that every “now” becomes “then” a moment later, and will never again seem as real as the present.

How to say it? He was a first-rate artist in a third-rate world. He never pursued a career, never put himself forward, but when he showed something, people remembered it. His powers of observation were beyond shrewd.

His sense of compassion was saintly. He noticed everything. He was kind. He had well-defended boundaries. He understood everything far too well.

—Gary Indiana



untitled (three figures), oil stick on paper, 21 x 18 inches



untitled, n.d., ink and watercolor on vellum, 7¼ x 11⅜ inches

R

I used to say that Richard Morrison was “the best artist,” because his work, his paintings, drawings, xeroxes, photography, books, film and video were tougher, more soulful, had better politics and were more deeply empathic than most contemporary art. And Richard had a magic touch, with a line like Joseph Beuys or Henri Michaux.

Pretty much everyone, I ever introduced to him, came to adore him. He listened to whoever needed to be heard, with a sweet intuition. Not to say that he couldn’t be nasty or dishy—sometimes fueled with alcohol. John Lurie, one of his closest friends in the 70s, recalled that *Die* the title of Richard’s magnum opus came from a social rejoinder/comment to those not appreciated.

He was in *Factura*, the first show I curated in 1985, and before that in 1984, we organized *Salon/Saloon* along with Bill Rice, in Bill’s decrepit studio on 3rd Street, across from the Men’s Shelter. A show that included fantastic artists known and unknown, including Chris Wool, Bob Gober and Jack Smith. He was continually of such exceptional service to everyone around him that it could obscure his own contributions.

I cannot remember now, what year it was when he did *Die*, his major performance/installation piece done at the New York Studio School, because he loved the rooms of their old Whitney Museum space on 8th street. It had to be after he performed in Robert Wilson’s *Einstein on The Beach*, at the Met and in Europe in 1976. That was the year we met. He was living in a loft on Bond Street with three friends. He induced me to film a performance by Julia Dares called *Bicentual Valentine*. From then on we were collaborators. He allowed me to take over his apartment on Rivington Street between Bowery and Christie for 6 months, hanging super 8 film all over the walls, so we could edit a film. He seduced me away from noisy white music into black R&B, complex, sinuous vocal music that breathed sex and which lead to me writing about dance music

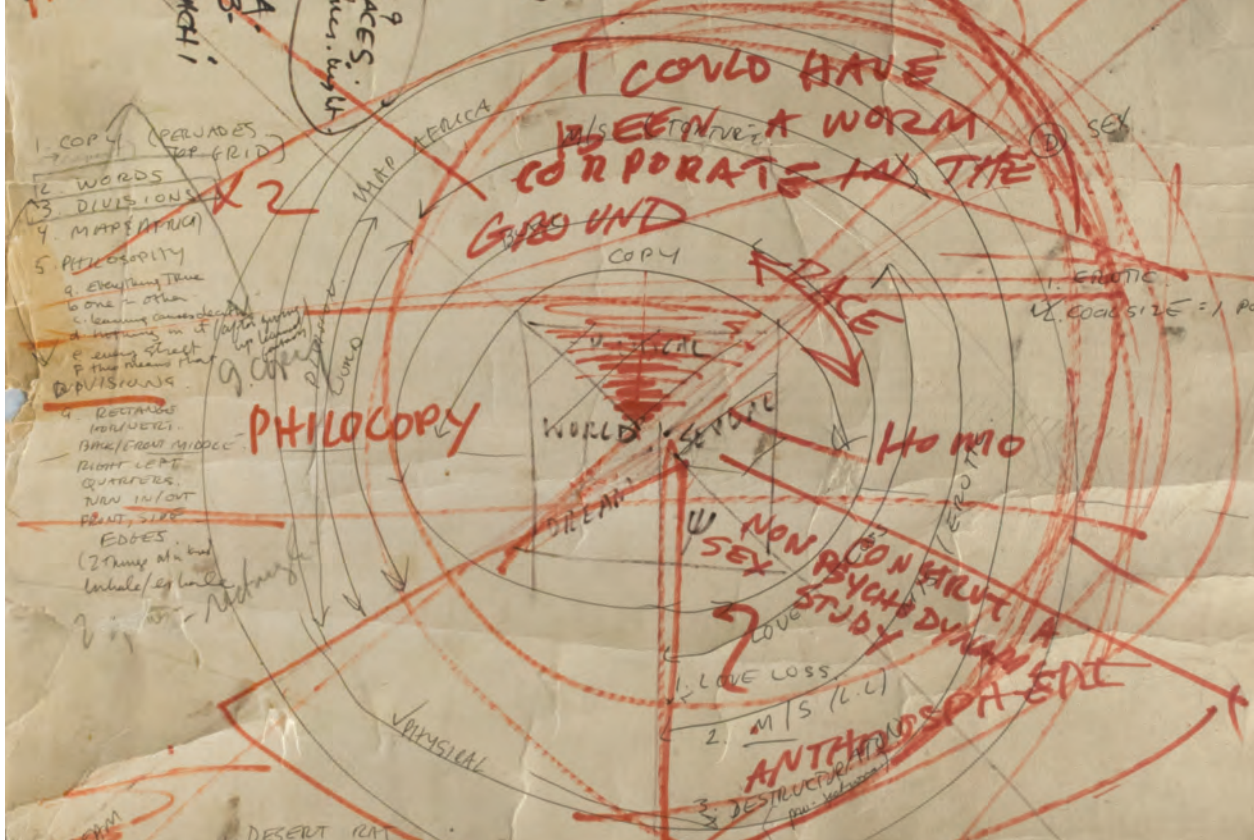
GO OUT GET RIGHT GOOD GONE UP RUN HELP HIDE STILL
DONT KNOW I WAS STUPID I FEEL LIKE IM AFRAID SO
WHAT IF YOU SAID THAT LIE OVER HERE COME LONG ROOM
SOUND STRIP SIDE TAKE HOLD SKIN BACK DOWN COLD CUT
DEEP RENT KILL BLOOD CAME WET FOR YOU ARE THAT WANT
WHAT DID YOU SAY THE WAY I HATE IS IN LIKE I LOVE
IT SAY PLEASE CAN CANT FUCK THIS THING SOME START
THAN THICK THEM THIN THEN WHEN YOU SAID THAT I WAS
WERE YOU DONT KNOW SHIT YES WELL NO THANK YOU EACH
EVERY END STOP DIE TO GO OUT GET RIGHT GOOD GONE UP
RUN HELP HIDE STILL I DONT KNOW I WAS STUPID I FEEL
LIKE IM AFRAID SO WHAT IF YOU SAID THAT LIE OVER HERE
COME LONG ROOM SOUND STRIP SIDE TAKE HOLD SKIN BACK
DOWN COLD CUT DEEP RENT KILL BLOOD CAME WET FOR YOU
ARE THAT WANT WHAT DID YOU SAY THE WAY I HATE IS IN
LIKE I LOVE IT SAY PLEASE CAN CANT FUCK THIS THING
SOME START THAN THICK THEM THIN THEN WHEN YOU SAID
THAT I WAS WERE YOU DONT KNOW SHIT YES WELL NO THANK
YOU EACH EVERY END STOP DIE TO GO OUT GET RIGHT GOOD
GONE UP RUN HELP HIDE STILL I DONT KNOW I WAS STUPID
I FEEL LIKE IM AFRAID SO WHAT IF YOU SAID THAT LIE
OVER HERE COME LONG ROOM SOUND STRIP SIDE TAKE HOLD
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THIS THING SOME START THAN THICK THEM THIN THEN WHEN
YOU SAID THAT I WAS WERE YOU DONT KNOW SHIT YES WELL
NO THANK YOU EACH EVERY END STOP DIE

ABOVE: *Die* text, n.d., xerox on paper, 11 x 8½ inches

OPPOSITE: *diagram for Die*, mixed media on oaktag, 28 x 22 inches

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POLITIK
 BLACK (LEARNED, POLITIK, SEX, Ψ , DISC...)
 2. TORTURE (M/S)
 KIPPA REST.
 SUSHI
 TEMUDA
 KIZUTAKI
 STRENGTH
 6-9 FACES
 1. EROTIC
 2. COOL SIZE = 1 POLITICAL



FOX ALL I KNOW
 Good Truck
 Keep it
 shut up
 1. DESERT CAT
 2. MARKS (IN FRONT OF EYES)
 4. CHARACTER TYPES & ASTRO
 (NARCISSISM, INFANTILISM)
 5. COGNITION 4 COPY
 (PRO-TECTOR)
 [IDENTITY w/ APPROACH
 PROFIT]
 PSYCH

in the early 80s. We made exhibitions, gave each other feedback, drank and smoked and talked for hours.

Richard's manifestations for galleries were each singular and considered. In 1988 he showed in a group show at Gallery 303 in their East Village space with Charles Ray and Nayland Blake. In 1991, he created an installation for a black room within *Social Sculpture*, an exhibition for the Vrej Baghoomian Gallery. His contribution was presented alongside major works by Cady Noland, Yoko Ono, Maya Lin and others. Richard's room centered on a collaborative film piece with David Wojnarowicz titled *Bust*, which consisted of a talking head shot of David discussing being a PWA in the early 90s. It was projected on a gold-leafed oval screen, like a Chinese album page. David was ferocious in it. *Bust* was later screened at the Berlin Film Festival.

Richard's empathy for people of color, women and gay men and women was related to his understanding that a central characteristic of his barely pre-digital moment, was a complex layering of information to describes multiple human realities. He worked on layered transparencies and wrote in the margins. He broke down photographs xerographically. He made books from his Xeroxes. His oeuvre is rife with multiple versions of iconic images, like the riots he glimpsed emerging from the Metro in Paris in '68 and printed in reverse like a Chinese scroll, multiple images shot from TV of Attica and South Africa. Everything (unless gifted) remained unsigned, untitled and undated. Richard was not interested in authorial control per se. He was interested in a process that exposed systems of control and enslavement as described by Wilhelm Reich and Aimé Césaire, as seen in the raw nerve ends of beauty and decay. He was the "best artist," because he had the deepest soul quality in his work. He described a dense, complex multi-cultural reality with a philosophy of resistance that reverberates with zombie-like tenacity in these dark days.

—Steven Harvey

Longnook/Ballston, 1986
silver gelatin print, 16 x 15½ inches (detail)





LEFT: *Richard Morrison as Einstein in Einstein on the Beach, 1976*

BELOW: *untitled (figure)* graphite on paper, 2 sheets, laminated, 8 ½ x 23 ¼ inches

OPPOSITE: *street*, black and white xerox print

BACK COVER: *untitled (hug)*, n.d., oil stick on vellum (two layers), 11 ⅜ x 8 ⅜ inches



