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Celebrating 175: Wallace Berman, Assorted Material, circa 1960-2010

Extracted on Feb-05-2023 05:33:39

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PEN & INK

Commentary on the state of art. This issue: Richard Prince.

PAINT IT WHITE I'm a liar. And I cheat too. I make things up and I can't be trusted. It's not my fault. I've always been a thief and started stealing when I was six years old. I took a knife from a hardware store, brought it home and when my father asked me if I did it, I told him no... I didn't take anything... I'm innocent.

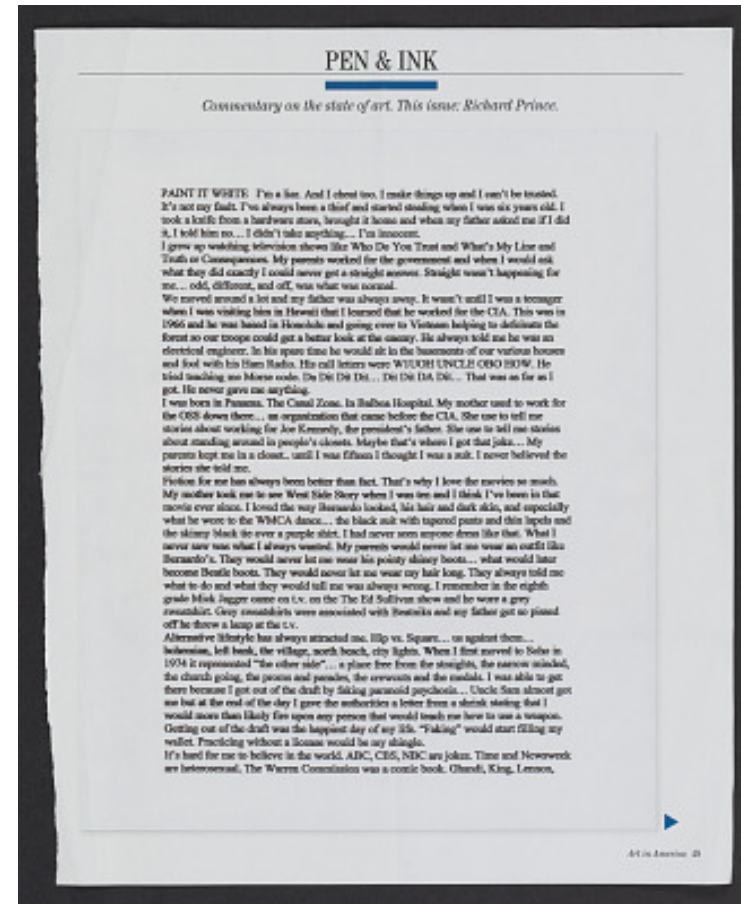
I grew up watching television shows like *Who Do You Trust* and *What's My Line* and *Truth or Consequences*. My parents worked for the government and when I would ask what they did exactly I could never get a straight answer. Straight wasn't happening for me... odd, different, and off, was what was normal.

We moved around a lot and my father was always away. It wasn't until I was a teenager when I was visiting him in Hawaii that I learned that he worked for the CIA. This was in 1966 and he was based in Honolulu and going over to Vietnam helping to defoliate the forest so our troops could get a better look at the enemy. He always told me he was an electrical engineer. In his spare time he would sit in the basements of our various houses and fool with his Ham Radio. His call letters were W1UOH UNCLE OBO HOW. He tried teaching me Morse code. Da Dit Dit Dit... That was as far as I got. He never gave me anything.

I was born in Panama. The Canal Zone. In Balboa Hospital. My mother used to work for the OSS down there... an organization that came before the CIA. She use to tell me stories about working for Joe Kennedy, the president's father. She use to tell me stories about standing around in people's closets. Maybe that's where I got that joke... My parents kept me in a closet... until I was fifteen I thought I was a suit. I never believed the stories she told me.

Fiction for me has always been better than fact. That's why I love the movies so much. My mother took me to see *West Side Story* when I was ten and I think I've been in that movie ever since. I loved the way Bernardo looked, his hair and dark skin, and especially what he wore to the WMCA dance... the black suit with tapered pants and thin lapels and the skinny black tie over a purple shirt. I had never seen anyone dress like that. What I never saw was what I always wanted. My parents would never let me wear an outfit like Bernardo's. They would never let me wear his pointy shiny boots... what would later become Beatle boots. They would never let me wear my hair long. They always told me what to do and what they would tell me was always wrong. I remember in the eighth grade Mick Jagger came on t.v. on *The Ed Sullivan* show and he wore a grey sweatshirt. Grey sweatshirts were associated with Beatniks and my father got so pissed off he threw a lamp at the t.v.

Alternative lifestyle has always attracted me. Hip vs. Square... us against them... bohemian, left bank, the village, north beach, city lights. When I first moved to Soho in 1974 it represented "the other side"... a place free from the straights, the narrow minded, the church going, the proms and parades, the crewcuts and the medals. I was able to get there because I got out of the draft by faking paranoid psychosis... Uncle Sam almost got me but at the end of the day I gave the authorities a letter from a shrink stating that I would more than likely fire upon any person that would teach me how to use a weapon. Getting out of the draft was the happiest day of my life. "Faking" would start filling my



wallet. Practicing without a license would be my shingle.

It's hard for me to believe in the world. ABC, CBS, NBC are jokes. Time and Newsweek are heterosexual. The Warren Commission was a comic book. Ghandi, King, Lennon,

Art in America 49

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