

RICHARD HELL

Poet as Eternal Student of Himself

Honest to a fault.



by Richard Hell

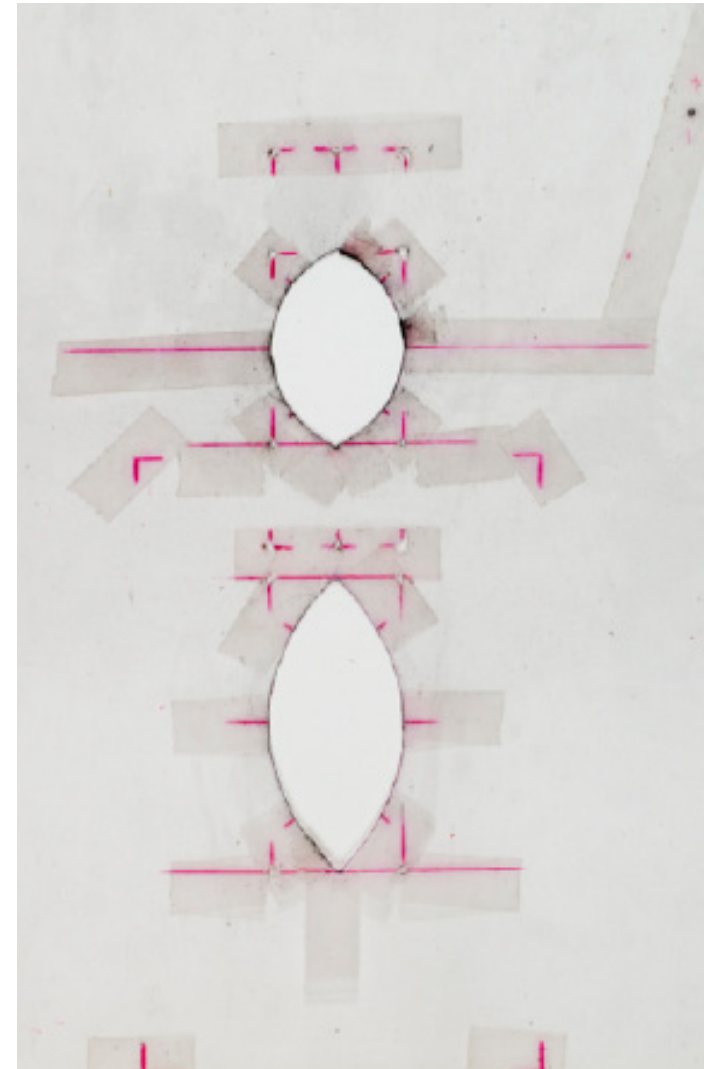
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Richard Hell is a singer, songwriter, and writer. Hell's work with the bands the Neon Boys, Television, the Heartbreakers, and the Voidoids, for which he was the frontman, was influential to many other musicians also active in New York in the early 1970s. As a writer, Hell has written several works of fiction and a book of poems.

I started keeping notebooks and journals in 1967, at the age of 17, after I left home and came to New York to be a poet. Those pages turned out to be useful, though for a long time I doubted that because, on the rare occasions when I'd look back at them, they seemed mostly full of boring angst and navel-gazing, along with fleeting enthusiasms for this or that, and ideas that were also forgotten as soon as they were recorded. I was still too close to that person to feel much but shame and frustration at his wild fluctuations. I kept at it, though, because I didn't know what else to do with my mind.

The pages held a roughly equal mix of personal experience (journals) and bases for works (notebooks). Actually, even though I advise my daughter now, when she mentions her journals, not to talk about feelings but to report experience, I've come to think about it a little differently. I'm glad I have the full record of what it was like to be that tormentedly young.

Eventually the literary fragments and ephemeral work-ideas came to have value too, even though I hardly ever carried them through directly ("movie: I want to play Roderick Usher"—summer 1974, or "Book: purely commercial collection of photos



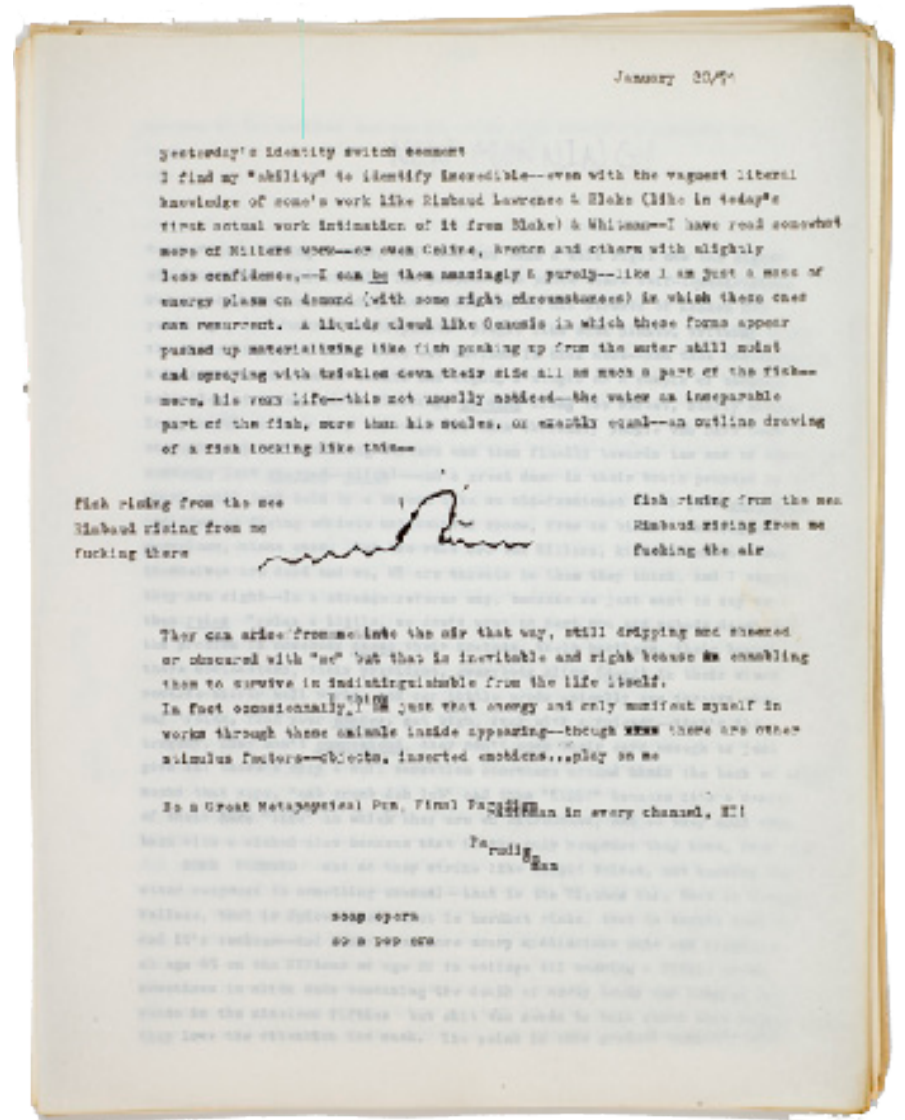
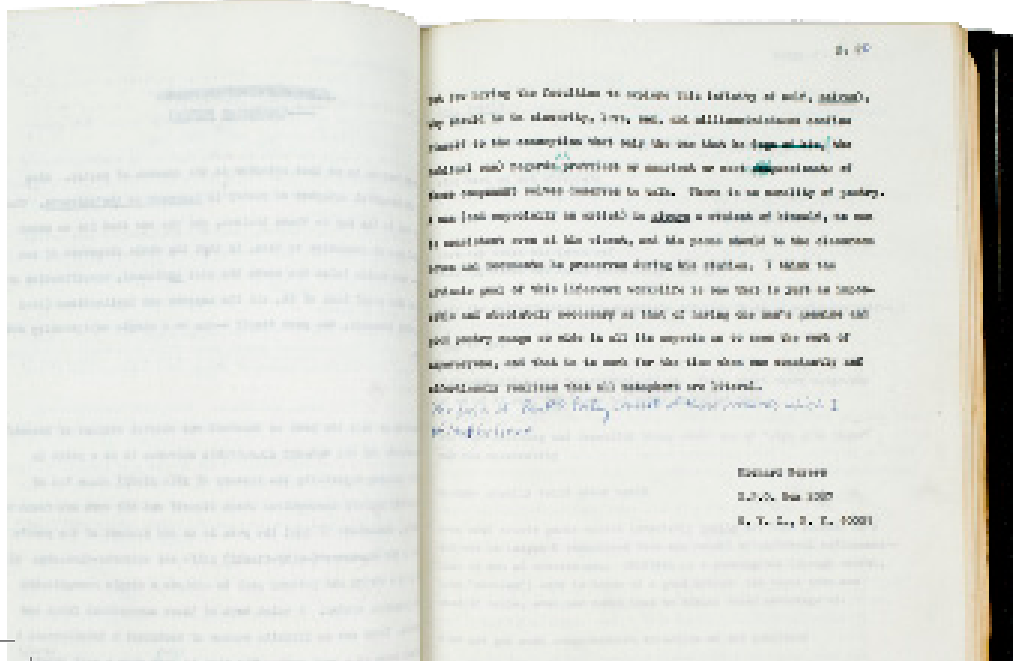
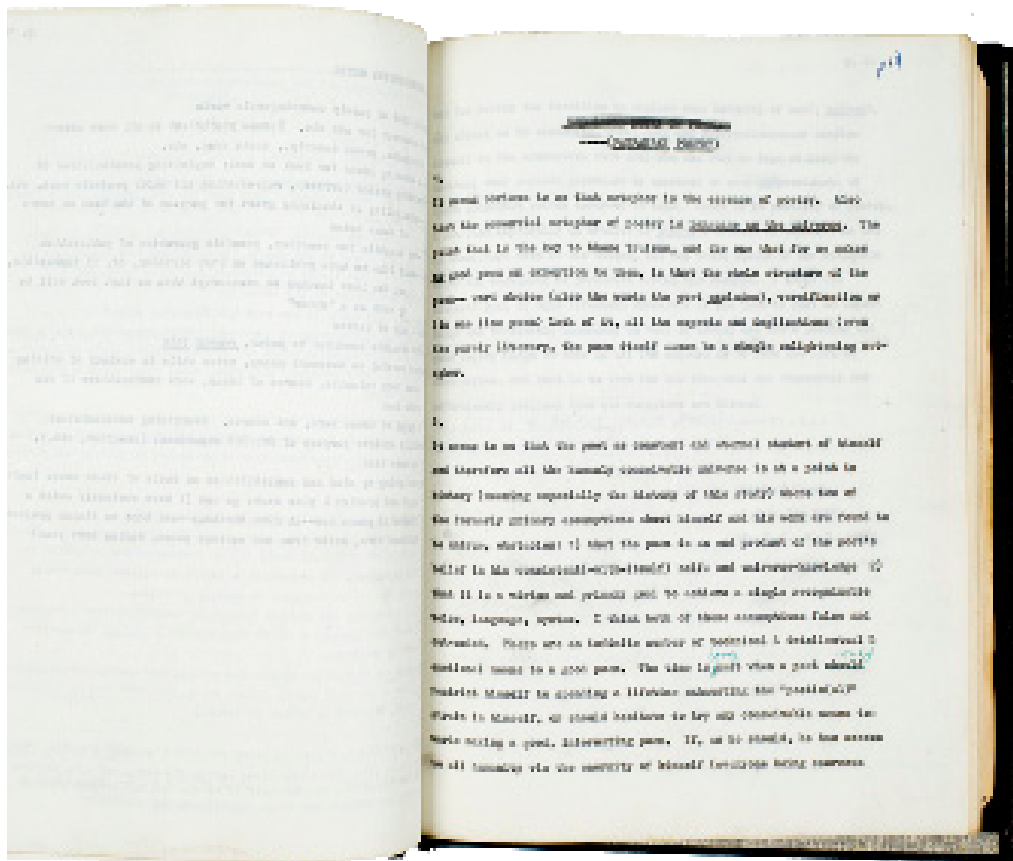
Page 152: Found graphic "Blimpie" sandwich wrapper, early 1970s.
Page 153: Richard Hell, template for typographic forms, 1971.

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of disasters"—September 15th, 1975). The spectra of scribbings eventually felt evocative enough that I published long stretches of them cold, in their full earnest inspiration (*Artifact*, notebooks 1974-1980, and then *Hot and Cold*, which included 1988-1998).

Notebooks, it seems to me sometimes, are the ultimate art form. It's a bit like Jorge Luis Borges' idea that, rather than create

a book (such as a "collection of photos of disasters"), why not just posit that it exists? The published notebooks can also be seen as a sort of mirror image of that concept, namely that they themselves are fictional: they're like props for a movie or a play about a certain character ("me"), or they are novels themselves (which isn't to say that they aren't honest—on the contrary, they are



Page 154: Richard Hell, bound typescript sheets dated September 1969.
Page 155: Typescript sheet dated January 20th, 1971.

honest to a fault). But regardless, I love the form of notebooks. Godard's movies are like notebooks, so are Dylan's songs, and Picasso's paintings.

The pages here are roughly chronological. Over the years I would also cop and save images that caught my eye, and lay them into the notebooks. That enigmatic Blimpie sub wrapper is an example. The marked-up

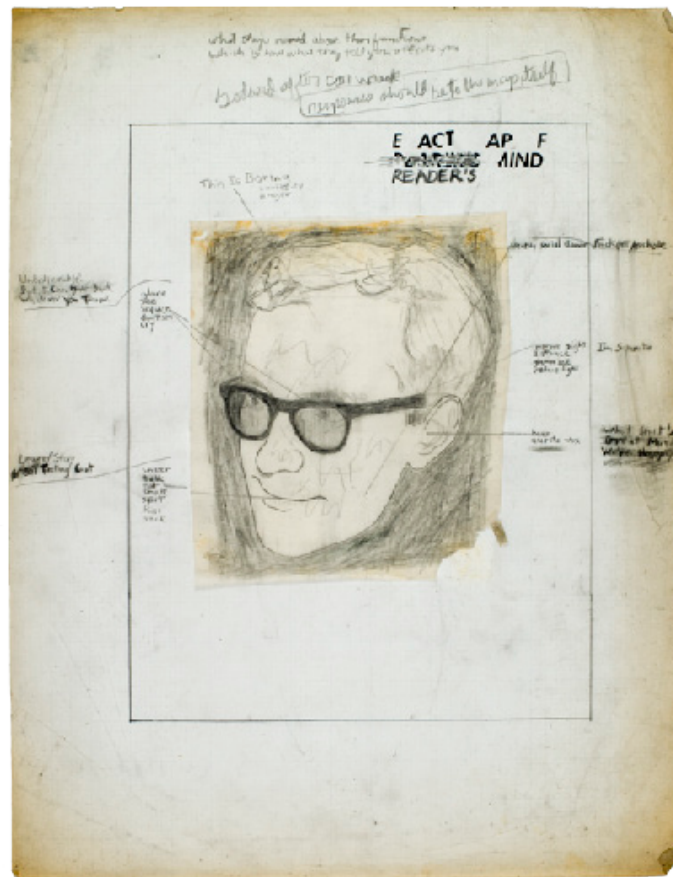
and X-Acto-sliced transparent plastic sheet that comes next was a template for use in the creation of a book I did publish, in 1971, called *uh* (subtitled "flip-movie dance alphabet peepshow toy enigma boring book"). It was an alphabet, one large letter per recto (like a flip-movie), reduced to so fundamental a set of curves that it was difficult to distinguish one letter from another.

1987 unsorted miscellany

Here a list of (rough) titles probably compiled from notes & time of '85 band

Secondary

- Elms Yourself Cocobro
- I Don't Know What to Feel About It
- See You Forenoon
- Elms With a Gun
- Stealing for Fun
- Geometry Talk
- Self Inflation (poem, "watts")
- Who Do You Belong To?
- X's for Eyes (Don't Get X's)
- Mem. Your Maker
- Science
- Sleep
- Not Stupid Enough
- Don't Talk
- True to Life
- Slumber in the City
- Slumber by Slumber
- Forgive Me My Apologies
- Good to Be in Your Foot
- Take Me There
- Get Outta My Dreams
- From Liberty to Inequality
- Sleepless Nights on Sheets of Paper
- See Below
- Brain Driver
- Driving the Brain
- Face Eraser
- Puberty
- Future Cliches
- Normal
- Let's Proceed
- Clinical Love
- True Life Love
- The End (Part) of the World
- Adolescent City
- Home You Lie
- Pills Galore
- Phony Gramma
- Selling Myself
- Don't Fit In
- Like Your Sex Expensive?
- I Am Worth a Fortune
- The Truth Is in the Youth
- Nothing is Enough
- Nothing is More Than Enough
- Saturated City (rain)
- Song on a Different "I"
- Don't Bug Me
- Brain Is no Purpose
- Look at the Hill
- So Good to Say Goodbye
- Good Mouth Beats Out



Page 156: Richard Hell, bound typescript sheets, 1987. Page 157: Sketch for a graphic (with the face of Jean-Luc Godard), 1978.

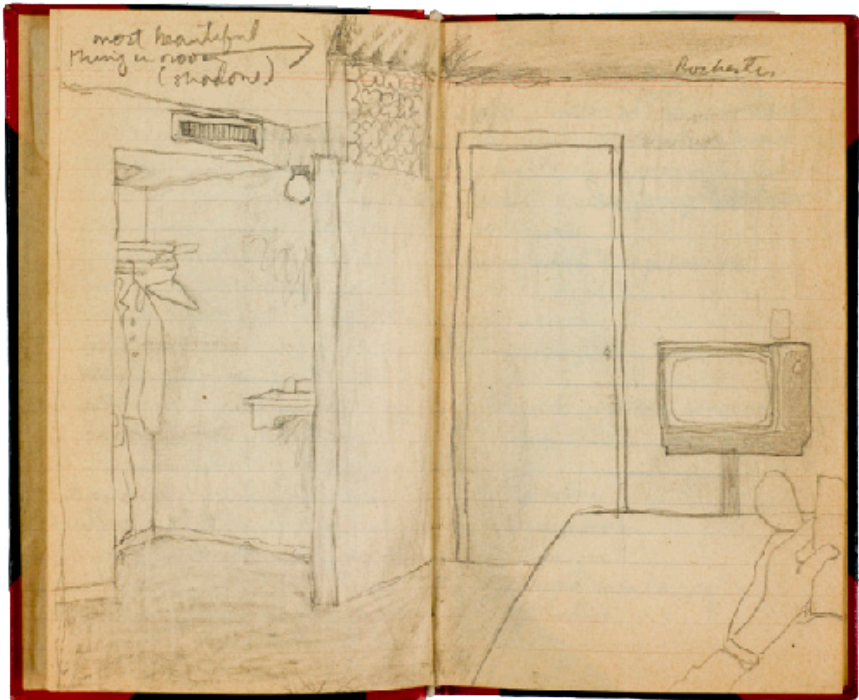
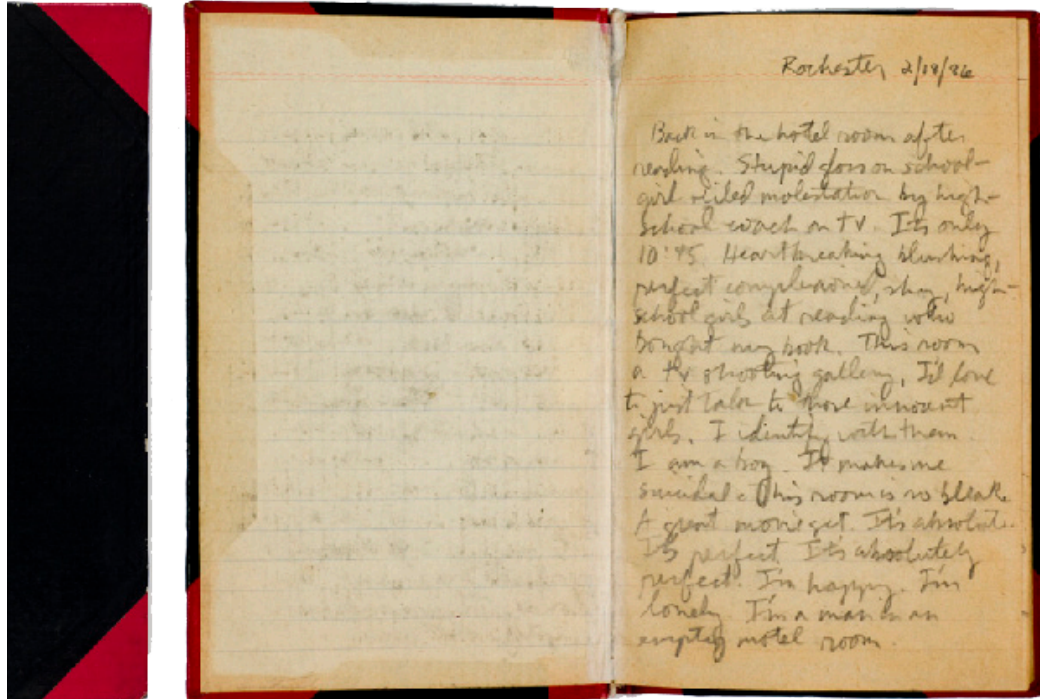
I attributed the book to "Ernie Stomach," which is consistent with the next couple of entries, written at age 19 and 21, being that they are meditations and manifestos rejecting the concept of a rigid identity, but instead affirming one's multiplicity and continuum of selves and that the whole range of such selves should be cultivated for works (as opposed to the old-fashioned idea of narrowing down to "find your voice").

By late 1974 I was focusing my energy more on music than poetry. I would be a professional musician for about ten years. That's illustrated by a page here listing prospective song titles. Then comes a big work intended for the magazine, *Slum Journal*,

I was planning in 1978. It was going to be a tabloid, each page of which would work both as a graphic (like a poster) and as intellectual information (words). The face there is Jean-Luc Godard. Then a few pages of journals, including drawings, from 1986, after I'd retired from music. I started giving occasional poetry readings that year.

Now the selection skips to the late '90s. By then the journals were pretty much limited to travel notebooks and graphics works, because otherwise my daily writing had become channeled into my novels and professional writing assignments (pages 160-161).

The present, or recent, era in art is often characterized as the age of collage. Maybe



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Feb. 11

Just an hour before I have to release the baby sitter again and I thought I'd get in some typing. Beat nice weekend with Patty and Ray in Delaware and no ever here and then my poetry reading in New Brunswick last night an unqualified success and when I got home Patty's there lovely and the baby an angel asleep. Patty seems to have some work renewed and very kind and loving. It snowed like crazy last night. I just reached over and touched it outside the window. It's great the way I need to leave them open in mid-winter and get to feel that nice cold sweep of air by my shade while it's all cozy in the tremendous steam heat.

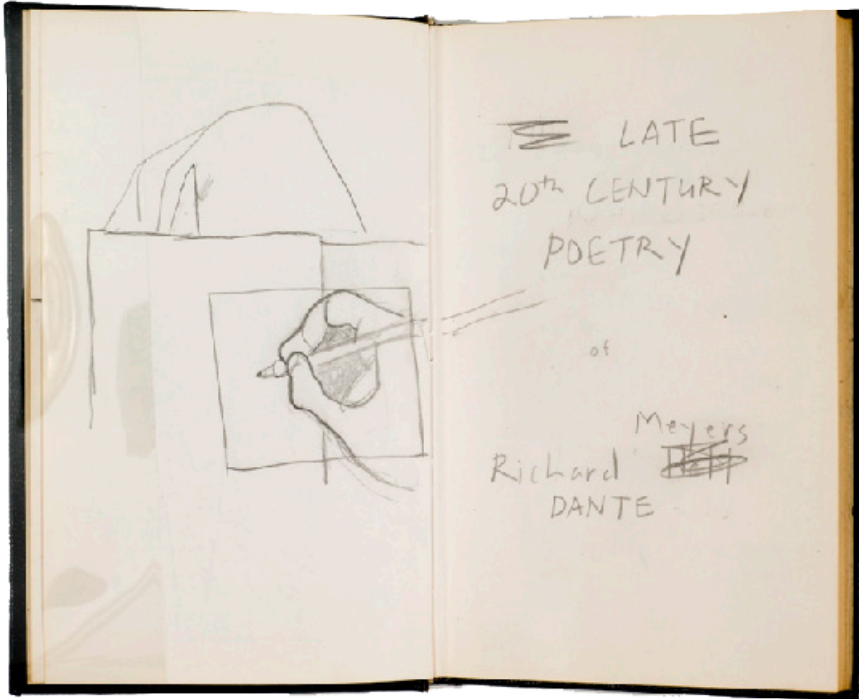
I took my monkey skull, pretty case of tissues and a stack of Thomas to New Brunswick for a honey assignment at the table I requested to read from. I said that the monkey skull was useful when I got bored (restless would be a better word) at home. I could look over at it and try to figure it out. Try to get my mind around it. That's a pretty good exercise. I think I'll try it.

MONKEY SKULL

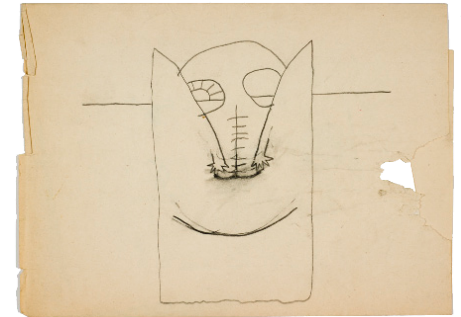
The apheles are so big, at first it looks innocent, like a baby. When you look into the sockets, you see holes where nerves from the eyeballs must have led to the brain. ("Eyes can't stare good. You can tell by looking."—Steven Shenberg) I understand that chimpanzee infants develop faster than humans for the first six months. The tooth look dangerous. The whole skull fits nicely in my hand. Recent findings suggest that some apes are not only capable of acquiring a large vocabulary of sign language, but that they can then teach it to each other. I was recently drift in the Atlantic for over 70 days found myself so close to the fish which were his only source of food that when he succeeded in catching one he would gnaw deeply. I sometimes wonder if intelligence or consciousness (the mind being aware of itself) and all that is really might not be an evolutionary error. The dinosaurs dominated the earth for an incrementally longer period than humans have ever existed. As they say, category reconstitutes phylogeny, or whatever it is. We've all been drifting single cells, fish, reptiles and furry tailed mammals, before we were humans and those brain notes are within ears like address wires. It's funny how that skull, ~~it's~~ more than a symbol. One would think, rationally, that one's ~~own~~ treatment of it, a "dead" thing, would have no repercussions. Yet only I would be frightened and ashamed to treat it with less than respect. Do I think of it as somehow still connected with a monkey or monkeyish in more than a symbolic way. Why do we have the dead. I don't want to be buried. I'd rather be left on my feet. There are social, sanitary reasons and there is death fear, but it also seems an offense ~~to~~ the ~~degraded~~ ~~to~~ view its vacant dwelling. I hope I skull ~~can~~ know I respect you. Is there a monkey there? See Rilke and Borges ~~and~~ ~~see~~ my rephotography its shoulders, mandibles and drawing books in chest, ~~look~~ ~~at~~ ~~the~~ ~~bell~~, ~~holding~~ ~~and~~ ~~hope~~ ~~the~~ ~~hips~~ ~~and~~ ~~legs~~. It's rarely aware of my own skull. Sometimes my tongue exploring my teeth and gums reminds me of it. I remember an ecstatic passage in Henry Miller where he says that if we could just compressed one tiny fingernail of a living form we'd have the universe. What is there to understand about a monkey skull? I am the spokesman. If humans are striking, they are the spokesman. I am a speaking genus of dead. I'm the monkey skull. Mystery is beauty. Language is a

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Page 158: Richard Hell, journal entry dated February 18th, 1986. Page 159: Typescript dated February 11th, 1986.



it's seen clearest in painting, from which not only did the original "collage" designation originate, but where the old concept of the "masterpiece" has been superseded by the artist's streams of works investigating or embodying every passing idea or insight, often gathered in "periods" or in concurrent discrete modes of style. The medium of the notebook inherently represents that mode of artmaking too. Notebooks might be as good as art gets in our time.



Page 160: Richard Hell, sketchbook pages dated January 24th, 1997. Page 161: Sketchbook illustrations, [dates TK].

