

BOOKS

Rene Ricard's First Book of Poems, Long Out of Print, Is Back—And It's a Revelation

BY COREY SEYMOUR

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RENE RICARD

1979-1980

“Any departure from the Tiffany catalogue prototype would be a liability,” wrote Rene Ricard to the designer of his first book of poetry, *Rene Ricard 1979-1980*. Originally published by the Dia Art Foundation and meant as a kind of Champagne-pop of an entire series of poetry books planned by the foundation, it ended up being the sole example of the form.

The reason behind that had much to do with the complexities of Ricard himself: Various (and often simultaneously) a poet, an art critic, a painter, an actor, a bon vivant, a Warhol protégé (Andy Warhol called him “the Rex Reed of the art world”), a troublemaker, and a troubled maker, Ricard cut a brilliant if shambolic swathe through the demimonde of the downtown New York art world and nightlife scene from the ’60s until his death in 2014.

His poems often seemed to serve as an intoxicating personal diary—with all the attendant rants, rages, triumphs, and grievance-settling one might expect from a poet who wrote:

*I am young
And I am beautiful
And I will fuck you
Over just like everybody else*

Or

Love: I did the homework but flunked the exam.

Buried in the petty jealousies and breathless infatuations, though, is Ricard opening his heart—in all its vulnerability and honesty and vanity and glory-seeking—to the world. What he was after was less about producing a book to be held up and admired and celebrated and more about making something of the glorious, singular, and often tragic scope of his life. As he wrote in a *New York Times* op-ed in 1978, “I’ve never worked a day in my life . . . if I worked a straight job I wouldn’t have time to do the

serious business of my life, which is to amuse and delight, giving my rich friends a feeling of largesse, my poor friends a sense of high life and myself a true sense of accomplishment for having become a fixture and a rarity in this shark-infested metropolis.”

For years, I've been on the lookout for a modestly priced copy of *1979-1980* but, long out of print, the few copies available for sale have been priced in the many hundreds of dollars. That changes now with the just-published facsimile edition from Éditions Lutanie in Paris. (French readers will also be delighted at this first-ever French translation of Ricard's work—the English and French poems are presented on facing pages.) And while the poems—55 of them gathered here—are often a despair, they're just as often a delight:

*I would like to see
You do something romantic,
In the sense of the Romance Languages
Do something gutsy
Like stand up and slap the shit out of Helen.*

As Rachel Valinsky (who translated the poems with Manon Lutanie) writes in her introduction of Ricard's works, “They continue to compellingly approach today's reader in their immediacy, their determination to say all without compromise or reserve, in the risks they take in exposing the vulnerable, precarious, but also licentious self.”

Of course, you can also just buy it because you like the cover.