

# Art Review:

Issue 25 £5.50

'I don't know what problem you have - but I know you're not just thinking about what I'm saying' Julian Schnabel

SEPTEMBER  
2008

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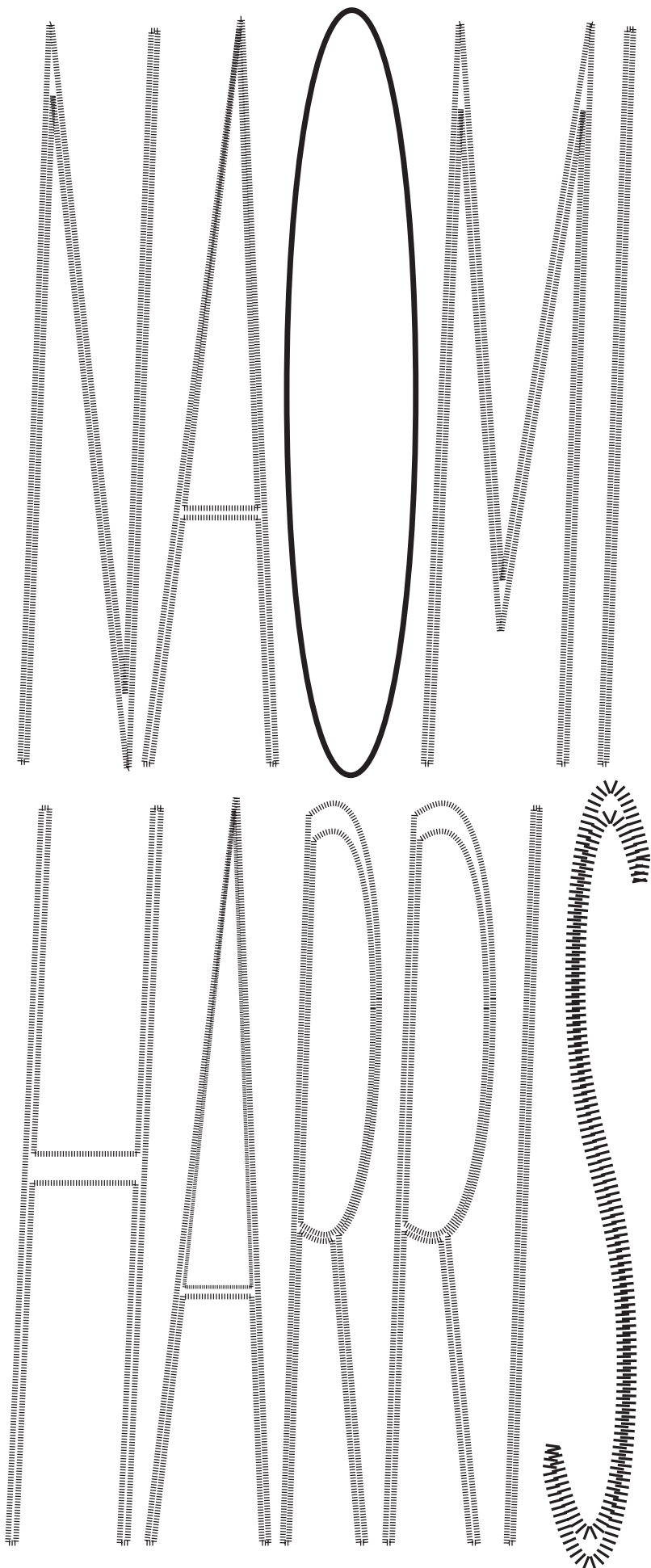
*Special focus*

PHOTOGRAPHY JULIAN SCHNABEL

*Old-school cool*

*Plus: Swinging / Cave Art / Napalm Death*





## Those Fucking Americans

words JONATHAN T.D. NEIL

*the whole swinging thing is very childhood for me... at least that's my initial reaction to swinging... I guess I would need mucho hours with a shrink to figure it out... but that's what I think about when I think about swinging... when I was a kid... when I was growing up... when I was living in my bedroom, under the covers, with a flashlight as the only source of light... Richard Prince*

It would be tempting to describe Naomi Harris's new book, *America Swings*, as a photographic monument to the pursuit of 'unbridled sex', until you open it up and find out that bridles do, in fact, appear in a number of Harris's pictures. It is also tempting to describe this project, for which Harris traversed the US shooting swingers parties – though we'll soon see that 'swingers' has become a very loose term indeed – sometimes doing so in the nude in order to put her subjects at ease, as uncompromising, except, remember, we are discussing sex in America, and there is no topic more compromised than this.

As Dian Hanson, Taschen's 'sexy book' editor, lists in her brief introduction to *America Swings*, 'For the most part, swingers today, as in the '70s, are: middle to upper middle class; between 35 and 55 years old; better educated than the average American; Caucasian; the product of religious Christian homes; less jealous than most; liberal only in their attitudes towards sex'. These are the people who do not regularly appear between the pages of fashion or other upmarket magazines (these are people who do not even appear between the pages of most standard porno mags); nor are these the bodies that one sees on television, or on billboards, or pretty much anywhere – that is, unless one gazes upon one's fellow subway riders, or beachgoers, or RV campers, or hotel guests, or grocery shoppers, and then imagines them, in all of their undeniably idiosyncratic and unairbrushed humanity, harnessed to some tree in the Minnesota woods and receiving oral sex, which is of course being overseen by a small crowd that includes one buxom woman smoking a cigar and another brushing her teeth, neither of whom give much credence to the (in this context, absurd) practice of covering their breasts.

It's quite an image, and apparently Richard Prince thought so too. Here's the story: Harris was shopping her project around various art directors and publishers. *Vanity Fair* liked the project, but it would not gel with the magazine's monopoly on cosmopolitan chic ('maybe if you photographed some good-looking people, we could run this', went the line). A London-based photo publisher took a look and told Harris she hadn't captured the 'humanity' of her subjects (what could be more British?). Finally, Harris approached Hanson.

Formerly the editor of *Puritan*, *Outlaw Biker*, *Leg Show* and – wait for it – *Jugs*, Hanson is no stranger to images of human bodies meant for less mass-market realms of commodified desire – which is to say, if there is an eye for human flesh that one should trust, it should >





WORKS (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

*Broken Leg and Barbecue/Swingstock/ Duxbury, MN/ July 2004*

*Strap Ons and Cigarettes/Swingstock/ Black River Falls, WI/ July 2003*

*Whipped Cream/ The Lifestyles Convention/ Las Vegas, NV/ July 2007*

*Glass of Mountain Dew/ Thanksgiving Dinner/ Big Lake, MN/ November 2004*

All images © Naomi Harris



be Hanson's. And Hanson says she knew immediately. It was the 'freshest' thing she had seen in a long time (most photo submissions of lithe young bodies in poses that take various Latin cognates Hanson describes as 'yawning'). Hanson explained that she wanted to put some of Harris's pictures in *The New Erotic Photography* (2007), a book she was then coediting with fetish connoisseur Eric Kroll, but Kroll did not think Harris's pictures were 'erotic' enough. Kroll, of course, has a good argument: eroticism is the province of desire proffered; *America Swings* reveals a landscape of desires fulfilled. But Hanson persisted, Benedict Taschen ruled and Harris's photographs were included.

Now, aside from bodies in various stages of lounging and fornicating, a majority of Harris's photographs show pools, boats, campers and RVs, folding tables and beach chairs, motel hallways, beds, blond wood, various inflatable items of all shapes and sizes, bottles and plastic cups. Such are the accoutrements of America, and the one artist who has laid claim to holding a mirror up to America, with a unique emphasis on its vernacular '-ana' suffix, is Richard Prince. Naturally, Hanson sent him the book, and when Prince saw Harris's image of morning in Minnesota, he could not turn the page.

The tale that follows is one that takes on the familiar contours of any standard issue 'big break'. From Prince tracking down and befriending Harris, to his conducting an interview to serve as the introduction to the book, to Taschen upping the size and limiting the edition, to Harris finding herself courted by mega-collector Mera Rubell and lunching with Charles Saatchi, to Simone de Pury offering up Phillips as site and host for the *America Swings* launch, it would seem that contrary to high-minded beliefs, the path to stardom in art, as in other of America's culture industries, does require that one shed some clothing after all.

Then there are the photographs, and here the story has yet to play out. For Prince, Harris brings the kind of access and eye that Diane Arbus brought to her subjects. Access is one of the great themes that runs through *America Swings*, and comparisons to Arbus are not unwarranted. Some of the photographs even exhibit direct echoes of the elder artist's work. For example, Harris's shot of two nude sunbathers at the annual swingers' Mecca, Swingstock, in Tonton, Minnesota (he with the crossword, she with a Harry Potter novel, each flanking a box of wine), updates *Arbus's A Family on their lawn one Sunday, Westchester, N.Y.* (1968). But Harris's photograph lacks the kind of pathos that could lead a John Szarkowski, MoMA's venerable curator of photography and early Arbus supporter, to say of Arbus's couple, "a real shocker – they're in Dante's last circle of the damned but they don't know it". Szarkowski was, of course, working within a milieu that harboured a healthy bourgeois *ressentiment*, the same milieu that drove Arbus to eschew her Park Avenue upbringing and to seek out the freakish, the marginal and the misunderstood (lest we think that the Westchester couple was none of these, all families were 'creepy', according to Arbus). Harris's subjects, in contrast, cannot be so pitied, neither for their possession of a damaged self nor for their self-loathing; there is no evidence of either in the pages of *America Swings*.

It will be interesting to see what kind of objects Harris's subjects do become, however: objects of derision or of envy? Of admiration or of scorn? What is certain is that for the first time those either in pursuit or in possession of such apparent freedom (from body image anxiety, from bourgeois mores) will have become images in circulation within a sphere that takes these kinds of things seriously – images, that is. Will they be billed as yet another example of conservative

hypocrisy? As an effect of liberalism's moral decrepitude? As an attack on the family? The debasement of marriage? Is this a spoiled consumer culture cannibalising itself from within? The return of the repressed? Or is it a revived libertinage, a true cognitive upheaval, though one without any adjudicative use for the Baconian revolution or Enlightenment reason?

No similar cognitive upheaval would seem present today, at least not one so readily legible from our current perch in the flow of history, but there has been a significant material upheaval, and it would be foolish not to recognise the (social net)workings of the Internet in the way that all the players in *America Swings*, from the 'Polyamorous Trios' to the 'Golden-Agers' to the 'Mandingos' (black men sought out for sex by white couples), refer to their pursuit as 'the lifestyle'. Of course, swinging predates the web, but there would be no social network with such national reach without it (Harris shot 38 parties in 13 different states), and nearly all of the swingers' 'confessionals' in the book mention chatrooms or websites at one point or another. These are not the mediums of swinging, to be sure, but there can be little doubt that they facilitate the confidence, and the anti-intimate contact, which attends any identification with 'the lifestyle'.

If Harris's photographs are destined for the walls of contemporary art galleries, museums and private collections (as they are intended to be), which is to say, if they are destined for the art world, then I am tempted, in closing, to read them as a profane allegory of the new rituals and mores that have increasingly come to characterise the social life of that world itself, at least as it is lived by its artists. In this I must enlist the aid of a different figure (perhaps the polar opposite of Prince), but one who has served as an acute observer of the subtle social, symbolic and, dare I say, phenomenological currents of contemporary art. Here, then, is Robert Morris writing recently about art in New York, though I take his observations to have national (if not international) application:

'I first became aware of [it] when I began to notice the hesitancy of students to make judgments about works of art – either their own or that of others. I think this low threshold of self-criticality, which might be read as a kind of permissiveness, allows for a less inhibited flow of art production. It is the activity first and only secondarily the product that allows for that particular form of life I am referring to here as young New York contemporary art.'

Morris then goes on to redub this 'form of life' – what else? – a 'lifestyle', complete with its own specialised rituals, codes of conduct, language and economy (both political and otherwise). I do not think it is difficult to recognise in this language of 'low self-criticality' and 'permissiveness', of 'less inhibited flows' where 'activity' is raised to an end in itself, the content of *America Swings*. Whether it is the true face of contemporary art may be a silly question, but at least we can be confident that it is a happy face indeed. •

*America Swings* is published by Taschen and available in a limited edition of 1,000 copies, priced £300, signed by Naomi Harris and Richard Prince, and an art edition, priced £600 and limited to 100 numbered copies, signed by Naomi Harris and Richard Prince, and accompanied by a chromogenic print