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The Lives They Lived
Remembering some of those we lost this year.
Rene Ricard: An art critic, and a critic of the art world.

by Luc Sante
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Ricard with his friend Delia Biddle, in her London apartment, 1972. Photograph by Gerard Malang

"Rene Ricard is a poet and movie star," reads one of his biographical notes in Artforum; unlike many such notes, it was absolutely true. He arrived in New York from Acushnet, Mass., at 18, having changed his name to Rene from Albert Napoleon Ricard, which sounds like a row of liqueur bottles. He presented himself at the Factory, where Andy Warhol assigned him to wash dishes in "Kitchen" (1965). He didn't fare much better in his other parts: He is silent in "Chelsea Girls" (1966) and unseen in "The Andy Warhol Story" (unscreened; 1966) and "****" (shown once; 1967). But he went on to parody his superstar abjection, rather movingly, in Eric Mitchell's "Underground U.S.A."

He was a movie star and a poet, but also an art critic and a painter. In his diaries, Warhol called him "the George Sanders of the Lower East Side, the Rex Reed of the art world." He did not mean it as a compliment. But while there's no question that Rene was an acid-tongued gossip, he was an Olympian acid-tongued gossip, far beyond the realms of mere columnists. In a better world, he would have been our Baudelaire — and he may yet be that, given the culture's propensity for posthumous compensation.

As a critic, he only wrote a bare handful of pieces, but they were major events. He was the poet-advocate of Julian Schnabel and Jean-Michel Basquiat at the start of their careers. In his 1982 essay, "The Pledge of Allegiance," on the Fun Gallery and its graffiti painters, he set forth his credo: "I pledge allegiance to the living and I will defend art from history. I will rescue art from the future, from its attrition into taste, and from the speculative notion that it will become more valuable with time." Those are brave

words and, considering how the art world soon evolved, foredoomed; his career as a reviewer did not last much longer. "I had to make my history quick because there would be no future, merely a gossamer world blown about on the zeitgeist, till zeitgeist, the wind of the times, is blasted away by kamikaze, the wind of God," the essay said.

He knew art the way few people do. An online reminiscence by Erik Wenzel accurately conveys the flavor of his table talk: "Always look at paintings on copper. … Paintings on copper maintain the richness of pigment that canvas sucks up. You can always tell with green. Green is a fugitive and unstable pigment, if you have a good green, then you can rest assured that what you see is pretty close to what it looked like the day it was painted." He spoke this way even in passing. And note that his formal schooling ended after eighth grade.

He was my upstairs neighbor in the East Village for just under a decade. He would accost me in the halls to rave when he was high, often something about Lorenzo Da Ponte, Mozart's librettist, who was rumored to have been buried across the street. I didn't know if he recognized me from one occasion to the next; sometimes he repeated the previous rant. Then he accidentally burned down his apartment, lit with candles and filled with newspapers and valuable paintings, and I didn't see him for a decade. But when I ran into him somewhere, he knew exactly who I was, and he showed me unprompted kindness, much needed then.

He became ever more elegant as he aged. In the words of the critic Lisa Liebmann, by the time he died, he looked "like a 17th-century, Franco-Iberian grandee: Specifically, the cold and brilliant Cardinal de Richelieu." He was brilliant, and he was rhetorically armored, but he wasn't the least bit cold. Just as his life could vacillate between glory and squalor, his poems — which he eventually took to painting over his own or others' canvases — are all heartbreak and defiance, ruined love and declarations of an independence he insisted on even when he sat at the best tables.