Why Internet Stories About Terry Richardson Matter

By Anna Breslaw
Photographer Terry Richardson, whose work has appeared in *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Vanity Fair*, *GQ*, *Rolling Stone*, has long polarized the fashion community with his X-rated shots of models in various states of undress and sexual engagement — occasionally with Richardson himself. Over the course of the past five years, multiple models, primarily young newbies, have come forward with reports of Richardson's inappropriate behavior on set. Now, in a new *New York Magazine* feature that stops just short of being sympathetic to "Uncle Terry," Richardson attempts to defend himself.

What's clear from reading the piece is that things could have been so much worse without the Internet. While his high-profile subjects may not have had a problem with him — supermodel Freja Beha calls him "one of the most sensitive people in the business" — it makes sense that Richardson wouldn't prey on them. First of all, they have the clout to turn down jobs with him. And even before the Internet, women at that level of fame could easily get the media’s attention if they reported anything inappropriate.

But not everyone is in that position, and as is often the case, the issue of what consent means is front and center. The fact that less famous women did not say a firm "no" and leave the room indicates, to some people, that Richardson did nothing wrong by reportedly soliciting on-set sexual contact — and that the women simply woke up with buyer's remorse. As Alex Bolotow, Richardson's longtime assistant (and girlfriend), told *New York Mag*: "I think part of being a strong woman is owning the decisions that you've made in your life ... Trying to put the onus onto someone else for your own decisions is really cowardly and kind of dishonest."

But one anonymous photography agent (one of the few anti-Richardson quotes cited in the article) hits the crux of the problem:

"Kate Moss wasn't asked to grab a hard dick. Miley Cyrus wasn't asked to grab a hard dick. H&M models weren't asked to grab a hard dick. But these other girls, the 19-year-old girl from Whereverville, should be the one to say, 'I don't think this is a good idea?' These girls are told by agents how important he is, and then they show up and it's a bait and switch. This guy and his friends are literally like, 'Grab my boner.' Is this girl going to say no? And go back to the village? That's not a real choice. It's a false choice."

Naturally, Richardson and Team Terry are going to malign the Internet as a place for random models to come out in droves and accuse Richardson of taking advantage of them. That's because the Internet is the only place these girls can tell their stories.
Today Jezebel published the allegations of a woman who says she was invited in 2003 to do a private photo shoot at Richardson's studio/home. She writes that she had previously kept quiet about it despite the fact that the experience left her "disgusted and unnerved," but now, like so many others, she's using the Internet to reveal what happened because the man at the center of the story "continues to be revered, hired, and supported by celebrities, professionals, and publications alike."

Considering how closed-mouthed industry insiders have been about Richardson's reported predilections, online confessions are important so that both sides — the world-famous photographer and the lesser-known model — can have a voice.

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