

“Skin So Thin, It’s Inside Out”

Ethan Persoff talks with **Paul Krassner** about running *The Realist*, hacking *The New York Times* best-seller list, and that “true, extraordinary liar,” Donald Trump.



In the late Fifties, three things radically changed the course of American comedy: Lenny Bruce, The Second City and The Realist. From its first issue in the spring of 1958, Paul Krassner’s iconoclastic “journal of freethought and satire” created a comedic template that is still being followed today; its mix of fact and intelligent opinion delivered with a mordant, knowing skepticism is as current as John Oliver and as omnipresent as the entire internet. But you don’t hear much about The Realist these days — it’s the fate of truly seminal sources to seem inevitable, when in fact they reshaped the world in their own image.

Fortunately, in 2006 Krassner teamed with archivist/comic artist Ethan Persoff on The Realist Archive Project (www.ep.tc/realist/), a free online repository of every issue of the magazine from its 43-year run. They recently collaborated again on a deluxe coffee table book, The Realist Cartoons, published by Fantagraphics.

The election of Donald Trump seemed to be a particularly Krassnerian moment, so I asked Ethan to call Paul and ask a few leading questions. — MG

ETHAN PERSOFF: Paul, what’s your opinion of Trump?

PAUL KRASSNER: Where to begin? Personally, for me, it goes back to when George Bush won the presidency in 2000. That was due to the Electoral College, even though Al Gore had won the popular vote.

That same time, Hillary Clinton was elected senator. She announced, publicly, the first thing she was going to do was get rid of the Electoral College.

Years later, I was doing a column for *The New York Press*, and I sent Clinton a letter asking her about the status of her promise. She didn’t reply.

During the campaign, Trump called Clinton a crook —

EP: Right, “Lock her up”.

PK: — he called her a crooked businessperson. But that’s what he was. Everything he says about anybody is really about him.

He’s a true, extraordinary liar.

EP: What’s your opinion of his “fake news” media scolding?

PK: Another example of projection. He calls the newspapers dishonest, because he is, in fact, the most dishonest.

Trump became an insanely narcissistic dictator once he won, bragging about his electoral numbers as proof. But prior to that, he endlessly insisted the Electoral College was a sham. That, to me, wins the prize for irony.

EP: I have to wonder, what if Clinton had won the electoral count, but lost the popular vote?

PK: Oh, then he would have said it was rigged.

EP: Lock her up!

PK: When I wrote the letter to her, it was partly because I’d heard the Electoral College was based on slavery.

EP: And there’s gerrymandering, which is also racist.

PK: Yes. You know, the thing with Trump, is there’s talk of anything from impeachment, assassination, treason ... But that leads to more irony, because that would leave President Pence. Pence has just as much an interest in turning evolution around, and going back to barbaric times, but has the ability to pass as sane. Trump can’t do that.

EP: Do you think Trump’s madness is an asset to his opposition? He’s such an easily identifiable lunatic, does that provide for a sense of protection, as opposed to Pence, who is so much more canny and quiet?

PK: There’s fear of Trump, and then there’s dictatorship in action. The things he’s been doing are disgusting -- these appointments! Like Rick Perry for Department of Energy. It’s so insane. And then, Betsy DeVos. No education experience ... I think even starting in kindergarten. *(Laughter)*

EP: Yes. Everyone has their own personal thing that they’re scared about with Trump. Me, it’s the environment. I can’t believe his appointment of Scott Pruitt with the EPA.

PK: They’re all horrible. Then there’s Michael Flynn. He is the core of the hypocrisy of the relationship between Trumpo the Elephant and Putin. *(continued)* 🐘

EP: What's your take on Trump and Russia?

PK: I read one article where an unidentified Russian official used the phrase "useful idiot." That's really what it is.

It's like J. Edgar Hoover; he stayed around for decades [via] blackmail. I think it's the same thing. You don't have to say it, you know. Hoover would just go to JFK and say "We found some photo of you in bed with Marilyn Monroe. But don't you worry, we'll keep it in our safe."

EP: You've lived through some Red scares; can you imagine any other time where this Russia stuff would be forgiven?

PK: I think foreign countries may have influenced previous elections.

I don't know, but it was mostly *before* the technology of the internet. So, if there's no internet, there ain't no hackin'. It's like there ain't no divorce if you don't have no marriage! Whatever deal was made, or hacked, I think Trump decided to run the night of the 2011 Washington Correspondents' Dinner. Obama had *such good jokes* that night. But the camera was on Trump, and you could see that he was *foaming*.

EP: That shot of him is amazing. The video of Trump's boiling back head. It's really gorgeous.

PK: Humiliation makes a difference. You know, years before any of this, Trump developed his *modus operandi* for media/political success: You cheat.

What pushed him into public profile was the stated success of his book, *The Art of the Deal*. But what I found out is that he bought 20,000 copies of his own book from Random House, and that made it a *New York Times* best-seller.

Similarly, L Ron Hubbard had his book *Dianetics*. He had a Scientologist working at *The New York Times* who had access to the details of their best-sellers lists. Back then, there was a list of cities that the *Times* measured sales at particular bookstores. So, Hubbard didn't have to buy 20,000 copies, he just had his spy tell him where to buy several copies at those locations, and the Church of Scientology had an instant "best-seller".

EP: Earlier you mentioned two interesting words: "assassination" and "impeachment." You have the benefit of having

lived through Kennedy and Nixon.

PK: My earliest remembrance of a president was Franklin D Roosevelt.

EP: Do you remember him on the radio?

PK: Yes. He was famous for having his Fireside Chats. Which, through these decades, has evolved into tweets.

EP: Here's a very pointed question: When Kennedy got shot — what's your memory of that?

PK: Several memories. One was my first wife was out shopping, heard it on somebody's radio, and immediately bought a TV set. That's one thing I remember, just being glued to the television... And I was getting calls, maybe not that day, but from



Cartoon by Wendt, from *The Realist* #37, Sept. 1962.

people wanting to write an article about the conspiracy aspect of it. You know of Jean Shepherd, right?

EP: Of course.

PK: He was a big influence on me. He said, "This will change the whole country." He thought it was a coup. And it turned out that the CIA had the Mafia do it. After all of my studying about it, that's what it was. The Mafia were the puppets of the puppeteer in that.

I would listen to Jean Shepherd every night, and he said — he *predicted* — that America would have a dictator who won the presidency because he came out of show business. And it happened. You know, [Trump's] not like Ronald Reagan, who came out of Hollywood, of course. But in Reagan's case, he couldn't make the distinction between reality and his

movie roles. But he did say he was willing to take a senility test! Of course, the suggestion that he'd take a senility test is a suggestion that you already are senile.

EP: Right. That's very funny.

PK: Jumping back to Trump. Along the same lines of the buying the 20,000 copies of his book, the first day of his presidential campaign, he came down the Trump Tower elevator. There were people with placards, saying "TRUMP 2016" — but they were all hired actors. Fifty of 'em.

EP: You know, the success of that red hat really disturbs me. It's so idiotic — but it really seemed to work.

PK: I agree. No other presidential candidate had a cap like that. And a slogan. I've seen people on TV asked, "What do you think about the election?" One elderly woman said: "Oh it's wonderful! We're going to Make America Great Again!"

EP: How could they win on a campaign of awful messages? Maybe Steve Bannon is some AD&D wizard, casting a spell that everything negative becomes positive. "Trust me, Trump: Kick babies instead of kiss them. It'll work!"

PK: I agree that's possible. But it's narcissism that made Trump do this. Narcissism with skin so thin, it's inside out.

That's what he was doing, too, during the campaign. If your skin is inside out, then

it's projecting. Hillary "was a crook," but *he* was. He called Bernie Sanders "crazy" and *he* was. "Lyin' Ted Cruz"...

EP: Why do you think those nicknames were so effective? It seemed, once you were labeled by him, you were done.

PK: Bush had his nicknames, but they were favorable. He called Karl Rove his —

EP: "Turd Blossom"!

PK: Right, "Turd Blossom" ...and he *was*.

EP: The prettiest turd.

PK: Regarding Trump's narcissism, here's my favorite joke: Trump was in the elevator of Trump Tower. It stopped on one floor and a woman got in. She said: "Oh! You're Donald Trump! Oh my, I would love to give you a blow job. I really would. I have a great reputation. I will make it that you will never forget this blow job. I really am good. I practice a lot. And I



The Disneyland Memorial Orgy, by Paul Krassner and Wallace Wood, published in the May 1967 issue of *The Realist*. Readers with annoying bare patches on their wall can buy a copy at www.paulkrassner.com for \$35 plus shipping and handling.

sooner than identify him.

EP: Was that a concern of his?

PK: I just volunteered it. So that he would know. And he allowed me to interview him, albeit anonymously.¹

When I published the interview, I started to get calls. Women who were pregnant that didn't want to be, and didn't know where to go. These were different ages, different classes. I remember one that really had the most force to it: A nurse called. And she couldn't get a doctor to help her. From a hospital, or even privately.

So, I referred her to Dr. Spencer. And she sent me a gift. She knew I had a little daughter. And she sent me a doll. A lion. Holly, my daughter, named it Lenny the Lion, after Lenny Bruce.

EP: Oh, that's great.

PK: I began to get more and more calls, and I couldn't say no. You know this is not an abstract placard saying "Peace Now", this was somebody that I could help. I couldn't say no — 'cause there are so many things going on in the world that you *can't* help.

I never *thought* I'd become an under-

¹An Impolite Interview With An Abortionist," *The Realist* #35, June 1962.

ground abortion referral service. But, you know, it became my calling, in a way.

EP: How long did you continue to help people out?

PK: I stopped when I moved to San Francisco [in 1971]. By that time there were others doing referrals — Protestant ministers. So, I left my practice behind me.

EP: *The Realist* was one of the first, if not the first, news sources to talk about Enovid [the first birth control pill].

PK: In the first few issues! And the pill was just a rumor. This guy, a journalist — I didn't pay him much — he did a two-part article, I think I paid him \$100 for each. He went to Puerto Rico, where they were testing women. I had mixed feelings about this, because they were testing them like guinea pigs. But it worked, and it became known as "the Pill."

EP: Since we're referring to a lot of issues of *The Realist*, we should probably mention the online archive. I recall, with some humor and business sense, you only asked one thing: That we edit the image to the Disneyland Orgy to include a link to your site, saying a poster was available for sale on your website.

PK: Oh yeah, that was a *pure* ad.

EP: The first ad to run in *The Realist*,

probably?

PK: Well, sure. (*laughs*) It was letting people know the poster existed.

EP: In the 10 years that the archive's been up, it's enjoyed a lot of regular traffic and is now referenced in many dissertations. By the way, did you see the *Washington Post* article linking to the archive, specifically the LBJ story?²

PK: Oh, yeah. I heard about that from Harry Shearer. He sent me the link to the article, where they refer to me as an "obscure 1960s figure." The subject line of Harry's email was "It's official!" and then in the message, a link to the article and the words "you're obscure!" I laughed hysterically.

I think the LBJ piece ("The Parts Left Out of the Kennedy Book," *The Realist* #74, May 1967) is still the most notorious article; people remember it. Lewis Black said he was 14 when he read it and said he was shocked! You know, because the article was written as a seduction, in a way. To the culmination, to the... what do they call it in sex? The climax!

And then I published the anagram for Nixon's veep's name, Spiro Agnew.

²"Trump's presidency is doomed," *The Washington Post*, Jan. 16, 2017.

EP: “Grow a penis.” Do you remember how that got published?

PK: It was originally a guy from *Life*. He’d interviewed me, and mentioned some of the staffers had seen *Rosemary’s Baby*, where there’s an anagram moment with Scrabble pieces, something to do with witchcraft —

EP: “Steven Marcato”.

PK: Yeah. Staffers had discovered this joke about the vice president’s name, based on that scene. They couldn’t use it in *Life*, but it had to go somewhere. So, I ran it in the four-page comic that Richard Guindon and I did together.³

EP: Both the LBJ piece and Rosemerica comic clearly bend into surrealism. The response of readers, delighted and *infuriated*, had to be one of the best moments of your life.

PK: Many, many people believed [the LBJ piece], even for just a moment. It was something I’d learned from Joseph Heller, when I interviewed him (*Realist* #39). I asked about one of the patients in *Catch-22*, who is in a veterans hospital. The patient was wrapped up like a mummy, fed through IV’s, excreting through tubes — he was just a middleman for digestion. I asked Heller, and he said, “Well you know, it’s possible, but not probable.”

EP: “Possible, but not probable” explains these last 15 months on Earth.

PK: Regarding the LBJ piece, there were people who claimed to remember a photograph! (*laughs*)

People who said they believed the article, if only for a moment, included

³“Rosemerica’s Baby,” *The Realist* #93, August 1972.

Daniel Ellsberg, who released The Pentagon Papers. He said the reason he believed it, was because he just so much *wanted* it to be true.

EP: Speaking of Ellsberg, and now Trump, how do you feel about leaking?

PK: Well, I leak several times a day.

(*Shared laughter*)

EP: It’s very good for you.

PK: That’s bladder control.

EP: It’s funny that the Russian sex blackmail was Trump having a urine party with a bunch of hookers.

PK: That was a fake. But it became a perfect image for comedians worldwide.

EP: But it’s like the LBJ issue — maybe it will stick. People also remember The Disneyland Orgy from the magazine. And the wonderful FUCK COMMUNISM poster.

PK: You know, I use a walker, but I go to the gym three times a week, to use the treadmill. I had my FUCK COMMUNISM T-shirt on, you know, the red, white and blue. As I was walking out, there was a policeman who held the door open for me. And he saw the T-shirt.

EP: Oh, God —

PK: He said, “Hey, that’s a great T-shirt!” He took it literally!

EP: I know the poster was said to be the perfect confluence of two banned terms.

PK: Kurt Vonnegut praised it for that.

EP: “Fuck” has kind of won, right? You can say “fuck” anything now, and it’s fine. That is one experience I don’t have, growing up when that word was so verboten. I understand how saying “Fire” in a crowded theater is illegal, but I don’t have an understanding of a world where saying “Fuck” could get you arrested.

How did Lenny Bruce work around it?

PK: He had to use a euphemism. He’d have to say “frig.”

The first time I met Lenny, he came to New York, and he called — because *The Realist* was his favorite magazine.

EP: That had to feel great.

PK: It did. Steve Allen was the first subscriber. He would give subscription gifts to several friends, and Lenny was one of them.

Lenny then sent a lot of subscriptions to his friends. That’s how it started, and how it grew — word of mouth — which is better than advertising, because it’s free and you’re getting it from someone you know, an individual.

When I met Lenny for the first time, I gave him an advance copy of an interview with Dr. Albert Ellis, a psychologist. Lenny was reading and said “He used the word [‘fuck’]!” I explained to him that Ellis had a campaign that “fucking was good” therefore, if you wanted to say something unfriendly, you should say “unfuck you”...

Lenny asked, “How does he get away with this?” I told him, “The Supreme Court said use of the word wasn’t obscene in a magazine if it was a redeeming social value, and no prurient interest.”

Lenny asked: “What’s that? Prurient?” He went to his suitcase on his bed in the hotel room. Inside was a huge unabridged dictionary. At first, it said something like “itching” — and Lenny asked, “Is this something like a novelty store?”

EP: Where they sell the powder!

PK: Or the dribble glasses. But the second definition was “arousal of sexuality.”

Created in 1963 by Paul Krassner and John Francis Putnam, this poster was a staple of dorm rooms for decades. Kurt Vonnegut called it “a miracle of compressed intelligence nearly as admirable for potent simplicity, in my opinion, as Einstein’s $e=mc^2$.”



Lenny was performing that night at Town Hall. He asked me to hand out copies of *The Realist*, with the Ellis interview, in front of the theater. From then on, Lenny thought that his act would be protected, because it had redeemable social value. But that's not the way prosecutors felt about it.

EP: Right. The conspiracy theory I've heard is that it's because he took on the Catholic Church.

PK: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely right. His "Religions, Inc" piece got him in a lot of trouble. The reason he got busted for obscenity was there wasn't a law against *blasphemy*, but that's what he was really arrested for.

EP: You know when Scott Marshall and I were putting together the Lenny Bruce tribute in the Wilcock comic, we included John Wilcock's experience with Lenny. You're in a few panels. It's been fun to find opportunities to include you in the comic — you're in five scenes now.

I have sort of a funny agreement with John: If he can't recall the full story, or dialogue, I can fill in the details.

PK: Oh (laughs), well. that's trusting.

EP: You both are very trusting people! He couldn't remember verbatim exchanges with you from 1961. So, we gave the joke from you to be "Lenny would be a big fan of your *couch*, John."

PK: That's funny. When I saw that in your comic, I remembered saying it! I remembered something that didn't happen. Now I have something in common with Kellianne Conway.

It's something I would have done. You made up something real.

EP: Thank you. I only do that in a few panels to keep everything glued together as a story. Otherwise it's just a bunch of disconnected fragments.

PK: Too close to reality, then.

EP: How do you think Lenny would respond to Trump?

PK: I think he would do it as a really high form of satire. He would make Trump a hero — in the sense that he would take a different approach. I'm saying that because he did that about Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi organizer. Lenny would say, "He was doing his job!" He would just take an approach like that. Lenny would "appreciate" the defined tragedy.

I think Bill Maher's show, Feb. 17,

was terrific. Lenny would have really appreciated it. Just the same way Lenny got serious sometimes, and the audience would say, "Hey, you're honest!" instead of "Hey, you're funny." Maher's monologue that night was really beautiful. Because he's well informed, and he couldn't just do jokes about it. He talked about the fascism. He talked about the dangers. It was just brilliant presentation of the seriousness of fascism in action.

EP: What do you think Abbie Hoffman would do about Trump?

PK: Oh, I think he would do the same thing as Maher. Abbie really had a sense of humor that was spontaneous. And it was based on being well informed. Bill Maher was doing that. He was rabble-rousing. He was trying to let people know how serious it was.

EP: I can't help but feel such sadness that Abbie is gone. You mentioned Shepherd as an influence, for me it's Abbie, who I regret never knowing personally. You read his books and every page glows. He's such a wonderful soul and gifted writer. Do you recall going to rallies with Abbie?

PK: I remember we had taken some acid in his home, and got a call that some Puerto Rican kids had gotten busted for pot. Abbie said, "Okay, we gotta go there." Show them the hippies respected the kids who were busted. Because they were Puerto Rican kids. So, as we're walking there Anita, Abbie's wife at the time, mentioned she was going to regurgitate from the acid. And I said to her, "You can just vomit over by the curb over there, and we'll stand around you." That we'd hide her. Abbie said, "Now *that's* community!"

There were lots of things like that. We saw a police car, full of four cops, two in the front and two in the back, and Abbie yelled, "You guys on a double date?"

I told him he reminded me of Lenny, and he said: "Oh *really*? He's my God!"

EP: That's an amazing story, partly because there's no way you can talk like that to police now without being confronted. I have this terrible habit where I thank cops. I got tackled once because a cop thought I was someone else, and, partly out of fear, I thanked him. I always feel like an asshole when I do it, too.

PK: I did the same thing (laughs) when they frisked me. They frisked the reporters because they didn't want the reporters to have guns in court.

EP: Was this for the Harvey Milk trial?

PK: Yeah.

EP: During that trial, you coined the phrase "The Twinkie Defense," You've done this a couple of times, creating an expression or a term, that becomes a permanent part of the language.

PK: I once started a list: Yuppies, Twinkie Defense, jilling off — that's a woman masturbating, instead of jacking off.

EP: "Soft-core porn," you coined that.

PK: Yes.

EP: What do you think Robert Anton Wilson would say about Trump?

PK: He would be very analytical about him. You know, he would talk about the insanity of it. He would just get to the core of Trump. He'd be fascinated by it.

EP: He does like "mind fuckers."

PK: Exactly, yeah. He would be a great analyst of how we all have some narcissism in us, but Trump is the king of — oh, you know I'm doing now what you did — when you made up what you think what I would have said, there. And now I'm saying what Robert ... what Bob Wilson would say.

EP: But that's totally correct, I think.

PK: But he would, because — there was a European order of priests who got married, or something like that. And I gave Bob the assignment of writing about that convention of the priests, as if he was there. He loved doing that; he made it seem real.

That was a very good form of his satire, because once again, it was not *only* possible, it was probable.

EP: What about Terry Southern? A lot of people see *The Magic Christian* happening right now with Trump — Trump is living out that description of the book. He's "making it hot for them."

PK: Terry Southern was — he put a lot of words in italics when he wrote. And he talked the same way. He talked with italics.

EP: Maybe he'd italicize Trump. Finally, how do you think George Carlin would respond to Trump?

PK: He might make a list. George loved to make lists. He could make a list of lies, of Trump's lies.

EP: Paul, this has been so good talking with you. Any closing advice to Donald Trump, if he's reading?

PK: I got my philosophy from [the comic strip] *Mary Worth*: "When in doubt, do the kindest thing." **B**

¹See *The American Bystander* #1, Dec. 2015.