

Judith Stein

AN INTERVIEW WITH
RICHARD TUTTLE ON RICHARD BELLAMY
AND THE NEW YORK ART WORLD

One afternoon in 1986 when I was on the curatorial staff at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, the guard at the front desk phoned. Three visitors from New York had come to see the Franz Kline show and wanted to consult the curator in charge. That was the day I first met the legendary art dealer Richard Bellamy, accompanied by his friends Mark di Suvero and Alfred Leslie.

At the time, I knew about Bellamy's Green Gallery, which had triggered the careers of di Suvero, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Claes Oldenburg, Larry Poons, James Rosenquist, Lucas Samaras, George Segal and Tom Wesselmann between 1960-65. But the man himself was a cipher. Roy Lichtenstein had famously ribbed the dealer with a character whose thought balloon read: "I'm supposed to report to a Mr. Bellamy. I wonder what he's like."

Bellamy's appearance that day surprised me. Indistinguishable in dress from the men who queued for meals at the church mission nearby, his pant cuffs were frayed to a fringe. He wore two sets of eyeglasses, one tethered around his neck, the other—broken in half and taped—posed on his nose. He was exceedingly polite, socially awkward and immensely charming.

Our professional paths would cross intermittently over the years. With each encounter, his intrigue grew. To reconcile his legend with the modest man I was getting to know, I decided to write about him. I began by interviewing his contemporaries. The elderly Leo Castelli confided: "Although Dick was younger than I, he was my teacher." A mutual sense of play drew Oldenburg to Bellamy: he liked showing with a dealer who told people that he named his gallery after the color of money. To Richard Serra, Bellamy was less a dealer than a producer, seemingly immune to the profit motive. "Dick didn't sell art; he placed art," said Richard Nonas. For Bellamy, art alone had worth; artists were the true elite.

In the last decade I have talked with nearly two hundred people whose lives he touched. I discovered that Bellamy's decisive role in birthing the new American art that followed Abstract Expressionism was matched by his undocumented, behind-the-scenes activities as a facilitator and scout. He practiced acts of gratuitous kindness. My informants pointed to his egalitarian and subversive nature, and his penchant for sharing information and time with those whom others deemed nonentities—rare behavior in an often snooty art world.

I learned that Bellamy was the first Asian-American art dealer of influence, although few outside his close circle were aware of his ethnic background. Born in Cincinnati in 1927, he was the only child of a Chinese mother and Kentucky-born father who were both doctors. Bellamy came of age during WWII in the suburban Midwest, where the only people who looked like him were in newsreels or Charlie Chan movies. Throughout his five-decade career he was particularly supportive of Asian artists, championing Yoko Ono, Yayoi Kusama, Tadaaki Kuwayama, Kunié Sugiura and Tehching Hsieh.

Beloved by those he represented, Dick Bellamy would nonetheless exasperate them all; most would move on to work with other, more commercially-minded dealers. Unlike many of his artists, he would never become rich. Bedeviled by drugs, alcohol, hemorrhoids and bad teeth, he did not attain sobriety until his fifties. Mentioned only in passing in most histories of the period, this unassuming stoker of the star-maker machinery was nonetheless a major force in the post-war American art world.

For the past five decades, Richard Tuttle has rejoiced in what John Ashbery calls the “fun to be had in the gaps between ideas.” In 1963 at the age of twenty-two, Tuttle arrived in New York during the height of the Green Gallery’s authority. The following year he became an assistant at the Betty Parsons Gallery, located directly across W. 57th Street from the Green. Wordless communication characterized the early stages of Bellamy and Tuttle’s friendship. They eyed each other on gallery visits, recognizing in the other a kindred sensibility.

Tuttle’s tender, small-scale manipulations of unorthodox materials were inventive, subtle, elusive, playful and poetic, adjectives that apply as well to Bellamy’s persona. The artist thought of asking Bellamy to show his work, but as a courtesy he first approached Parsons, who unexpectedly agreed. Tuttle’s debut of constructed paintings in September 1965 launched his career. Although Bellamy never represented the artist, he did include his work in an unusual group exhibition after the Green Gallery closed.

During the summer of 1967, Bellamy mounted *Arp to Artschwager*, a wittily-titled selection of two dozen sculptors at the Noah Goldowsky Gallery. Tuttle showed alongside many of Bellamy’s discoveries and friends, including John Chamberlain, Christo, Walter de Maria, Mark di Suvero, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Gary Kuehn, Robert Morris, Reuben Nakian, Bruce Nauman, Claes Oldenburg, Keith Sonnier, Michael Steiner, H.C. Westermann and Robert Whitman.

In my 2002 conversation with Tuttle about Bellamy, he talked about the tangencies of their lives, and the art world they mutually inhabited. After Bellamy’s collaboration with Noah Goldowsky (1966-73), he operated the Oil and Steel Gallery on Chambers Street and then in Long Island City, from 1980 until his death in 1998.

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Judith Stein: I thought you'd like to see a photocopy of a 1970 *Vogue* article on the New York art world that includes a picture of Dick Bellamy; he's the one down here with a shock of thick hair covering one eye.

Richard Tuttle: These were the hot young dealers of the moment?

JS: Yes, right.

RT: Oh, that's Paula [Cooper].

JS: Apropos of Paula, Richard Artschwager once told me he remembered the first time he ever saw her; she was so beautiful, she took his breath away.

RT: Paula had this Greek quality, the power and the dignity and the handsomeness, her beauty was a combination of that, the strength and character with the youth of her. I knew her when she had her first job at a gallery on La Guardia Place. Anyway, Dick liked her—he had an eye for the ladies.

JS: At the time, you were working for the Betty Parsons Gallery—when did you start there?

RT: In the fall of '64.

JS: That would have been the last season of the Green Gallery. Do you remember going to the Green?

RT: It was right across 57th Street from Betty Parsons. Normally I'd go to their openings. I remember the Larry Poons show [Feb '65] was a great show. Neil Williams I remember. Perhaps that was the season when Lucas Samaras lived in the gallery all summer long and recreated his studio/bedroom in his mother's house in New Jersey [Sept '65].

JS: Exactly.

RT: Yes that was terrific, very memorable. There were a lot of memorable shows—the Robert Morris show must have been that season too [Dec '64].

JS: Yes, he had two shows almost back to back, when he introduced the gray boxes.

RT: Minimal sculptures, yes.

JS: Later on that season—into the spring of 1965—the Green Gallery sponsored a Daniel Spoerri exhibition off-site at the Chelsea Hotel; although it's commonplace now for galleries to sponsor shows outside of their walls, Spoerri's was one of the first. Dick may well have been the pioneer—four years after the Green sponsored Claes Oldenburg's Store on the Lower East Side.

RT: I just read somewhere recently that Spoerri's work was not well-known in New York. I thought that was strange because, on the whole, he was definitely part of the Fluxus group. Fluxus work was known by some people and it was an important repository for certain kinds of aesthetic; I think that Dick's aesthetics were not antithetical to Fluxus in general and Spoerri in particular. But that would have been before what I think of as Spoerri's most famous works, where he would freeze tables after dinners. . . .

JS: In fact that *is* what he was showing at the Chelsea Hotel, "snare pictures" he called them, where he glued down the remains of a meal, food leavings, wine glasses and cigarette butts.

RT: Yes, which were totally wonderful, very aesthetically freeing, but, of course that's from Dusseldorf. So when I went to Dusseldorf, maybe two years later, I felt very comfortable with that kind of art. Spoerri is one of those very interesting artists who bridges, acts as a kind of a transitional personality. He had close ties with the Zero artists in Dusseldorf and then he was close to others. I guess the Zero artists could befriend Yves Klein and in turn reach others. There was almost a Pan-European communication at that time, the same kind as took place in the 1920s with Schwitters, Dadaists and early Surrealists.

You had Manzoni who traveled a lot through different capitals and connected artists with one another and Spoerri did that as well. It was kind of amazing that Dick's gallery—even to the degree that it sponsored a show in Spoerri's Chelsea Hotel room—would recognize that. Some people call that moment in European art New Realism which I think is actually a pretty good name. The destruction during the Second World War included a destruction of an old realism. The meaning of the new realism was that people were aware of this—a lot of the aesthetic does have to do with detritus.

I recently thought about Spoerri. I'm doing a book with a great poet in France, Anne-Marie Albiach¹ and I took the paper table cloths from the two square tables that we had at lunch and traced all the circles that were left behind from glasses and wine and plates and so on, and then folded the whole tablecloth together which produced exactly twelve images and twelve empty spaces because the back of the book of course had no drawings on it. That's where the poems will be going. In fact there turned out to be 48 stanzas in this poem so we just multiplied the table by four. For me, it brings a certain social relation and a warmth to the project. I think in the case of Spoerri's pieces, even though you're looking at cigarettes and ashes and leftover food and everything, there's the most wonderful social feeling that's created.

JS: How would you describe your relationship with Dick?

1. TUTTLE, RICHARD. *L'Exces: Cette Mesure. 48 poemes d'Anne-Marie Albiach & 48 dessins de Richard Tuttle*. Paris 2004.

RT: Perhaps even physically, he and I had a kind of similarity, or were similar types. When we looked at each other, there was a kind of a connection. And I'm not even sure if I ever spoke to him at that time; but for all the years afterward, I knew that whenever I came in his presence, there was instant recognition. It was more like two old souls, how they might recognize themselves in this world, or meet in this world. In a way I think our entire relationship was like that. It was never about anything in this life or this particular reincarnation. And we liked that, maybe, because at the very end, maybe even in the weeks before he died, we must have met 6 or 7 times just by accident in different places, waiting in line to buy tickets to concerts, or in museums, or on the street or wherever. I think of him as a bodhisattva, a lot of his work here was exactly what you'd expect a bodhisattva to do.

JS: In a way, he elected not to ascend to the nirvana of the other dealers.

RT: Well yes, that's the kind of move an artist knows very, very well. Just to carry on with the idea of earlier lives, he could be an example of someone who had been an artist in an earlier life, and he was one, in a way, here. He never seemed very comfortable being here although he loved helping artists. I think his greatest pleasure in life was helping artists. Certainly I felt that.

Whenever I met him I always felt he was asking, "Can I help you?" asking himself, "How could I help this person?" That's a wonderful recognition, especially when you're young and you don't know; that's why I worked with Betty Parsons—because she had been in the art world since the 1920s and knew so much about how an artist can survive, or take a position, or contribute in this world, because there are no rules, there are no patterns, and no concrete forms, as there are for doctors or lawyers.

But then it was also a question of, if he had been an artist, what is there after being an artist? A little bit, I think one of the things about Dick that was very elevated was his compassion. I mean you just took one look at him and you knew that this was a person who had enormous compassion, and that he was a higher being. It's almost like you could tell a higher being by the amount of compassion they have, but then if you have as much compassion as an artist does, then why do you come back?

There are some people who say that when you get maximum compassion then you can't read the object of your compassion. And I guess I felt a little bit about Dick that he liked to help people but he was also bound. His compassion for the artist bound him to the artist and I was a little uncomfortable with that. Also I kept a little distance.

A curious thing happened during the last talks I had with Dick. I had been to the University of Texas at Austin where the James Michener collection was located and there was this small group of extremely terrific artworks that Michener bought at the very end, before he gave his collection

to the University of Texas. There's a Jo Baer, a Brice Marden, a work of mine, and so on. I had learned somehow that James Michener and Dick had been very close and so I thought the only explanation for the presence of these pieces was that Dick had just run him around town at a certain point and acquired these pieces for him. There's such an aesthetic leap—it's like light years between them and anything else Michener had collected. They are of such outstanding quality; it's awesome that such a high quality group had been acquired.

So I asked Dick pointedly, did you take Michener around town? He said that he had not, and that he in fact didn't know how Michener had done it. He also belittled his connection with Michener and said that they just liked to have a drink occasionally or something like that. I don't think it was like him to dissemble; this wouldn't come out of some extreme case of discreteness or self-deprecation. But on the other hand, I don't feel like committing myself to its truth either.

JS: In fact he *was* involved with shaping the Michener collection. The painter David Reed has been interviewing artists whom Michener collected and they speak about Dick as the liaison.

RT: In the introduction to his collection catalogue, Michener does mention Dick.

JS: But I found it peculiar that Michener refers to Dick as a "boy"—he was fifty years old at the time the two worked together. His take on Dick seems patronizing.

RT: Yes, I was thinking of Michener's rather laborious first steps into American art, visiting the Whitney Museum when it was on 8th Street, at lunch breaks, and really looking at what they collected. It would not have prepared him for a leap to the work Dick was showing, which was very much more self-realized, in a more leadership mode. It's a mystery.

JS: After Robert Scull pulled out his funding and the Green Gallery collapsed, Dick was working out of Noah Goldowsky's for several years. Did you track him informally in the post-Green years, or go to any of the shows that he did at Goldowsky's?

RT: Did he show the Japanese artist, Kusama? I remember seeing her at Goldowsky's.

JS: He showed Kusama at the Green. Donald Judd introduced him to her new work. Dick debuted her sculpture in a 1962 group show although he never gave her a solo show. During the Green's run, Dick brokered Yoko Ono's very first sale, to Robert Scull, although she didn't show with him. Dick had an extra sensitivity to women artists. He was also particularly receptive to Asian artists, likely because his mother was Chinese.

In the early '60s, there were not many women artists in a given gallery stable. Yet the percentage of women who were at the Green Gallery is above average. That didn't happen accidentally, although I don't credit him with a feminist consciousness per se.

RT: Yes, I wouldn't call it feminism either; but I think he had a particular, strong vision about where art can come from. It's very un-"PC" to say it, but you use a word like psyche. . . it seemed that Dick could distinguish it. Nowadays everybody will say that it just comes to the same place, but in some of these cases, it's good to go back to an emergence place and remember that. So, Dick would represent what was; there certainly had been examples of women, second-generation abstractionists, plenty of examples. But Dick really seemed to sense that art came from a very special place where cycles, physiognomy, the woman, without utilizing her, worshipping her even because of that special possibility but not, I guess the most important thing would be that he didn't feel it had to be defined.

He knew it, but defining would belittle it somehow or another, or wrap it up, encapsulate it some way or another and he didn't want to do that and that was great. I think that's what his treatment of Kusama was about. Sure there are dealers and there are artists and it's always a question of how a particular dealer will work with a certain artist, certain dealers. And it's wonderful these days to think about historic dealers and study them.

JS: What do you think made Dick special as a dealer?

RT: I think that another wonderful thing about Dick is that he tended to think artworks were living things, not dead things. That's both part of his greatness and part of why he wasn't among the best or the most successful dealers. Ultimately those people wind up thinking about art as a dead thing they're working with, dead.

JS: Well, they can have some distance. You were talking before about that. If I ask you about his least admirable traits, would you point to his lack of appropriate distance, or is there anything else?

RT: It's hard to say. My interest is to make my contribution, and so I would look at people in terms of how much help could I get from them, or what they were capable of doing.

Yes, I thought that he was more like an inspiration, or almost like a muse, a spirit. He had a beautiful spirit: it's wonderful in the art world to find somebody with that beauty of spirit among all the sort of dark, twisted, unattractive parts of the art world.

I remember visiting his Oil and Steel gallery on Chambers Street a couple of times, but it was too far out of the way for most people. I guess he also seemed to me to be somebody who must be like the sun, who would go behind the clouds, and then the cloud would go away and then he'd shine through.

It was curious that I met him so often in the last couple of weeks of his life. It was as if before he really did leave the world, he wanted to be present for me, more so than he ever had been before. Dick wasn't, what do you say, capable. For example, my wife and I would know the right way to get tickets, and avoid waiting in a long line only to find that they were all sold out.

Once we saw Dick at the end of such a line and went up to him to ask "why did you stay in the line?" He had a kind of funny dreaminess where he couldn't really take care of himself; he floated around but was also very present. I've spoken to other people who also said they saw him a lot in his last weeks; I'm not saying this had anything particularly to do with me.

JS: I have heard that in the weeks before he died, he went to a lot of concerts and would get tickets and invite many people to come with him.

RT: I went to his funeral and people mentioned things like that. It's interesting; everybody had a kind of a Dick Bellamy story, like seeing him on the other side of the street, him not coming over or something.

I think that art is a real thing. Sometimes I find it useful to personify art. There are people who seem to be closer or farther away from art at different times of their lives. Artists loved Dick because he was so close to art. He wasn't a threat because he wasn't an artist; but even if he were an artist, I don't think it would have made any difference. He had a wonderful presence and comfort for artists. A lot of times, artists will actually have a very difficult relationship with art. There's a lot of struggle involved, a lot of suffering. But somehow when we saw Dick, our suffering was placated and calmed and soothed because he had such a good relation to art. That's the way it seemed to me.

He did have a calming effect. It was marvelous during the Green Gallery days because the shows were anything but calm. That's another kind of anomaly. Dick was outstanding when around the anomalous. I feel now that the Pop moment was a reaction to the tremendous inward gaze that the abstract expressionists promoted. It had gone on for three decades and people were staring harder and harder at their navels, getting less and less out of it. It just suddenly hit everybody, "Why the hell don't we look at that chair?" Or look out for a second.

I know I'm drawing a picture of a collective, but I think it is a little bit more of that, a lot of people just looked out for that moment just because of this habitual introspection, which is another way of saying honing a criticism. But the moment they looked out, they not only had a great, fresh view, but they also had the benefit of the critical that was gained by this inward looking. Dick was very much an inward-looking person. So it's all the more anomalistic that he would be one of the chosen dealers behind Pop Art. In fact, he may have been the one who needed that more than anyone else, so it was more meaningful.

JS: Irving Sandler has called him “the eye of the sixties.” And he was; he had such an important role in shaping that shift you’ve been talking about, and he helped invent the new art world canon of the ’60s. He was right there at the key moment.

RT: I don’t know if you’ve read the new book on Emily Hall Tremain, *Collector on the Cusp*, which mentions Dick’s relationship with Pop art—you should. What I’m saying about this moment is most directly coming from her. Classical Athens was overnight and the Renaissance was overnight too—these really terrific moments go by so fast. . . .

Bellamy was one of the first to see Pop, and he was the first to dump it. He dumped it far before his backer Robert Scull did; and he was right. The real energy didn’t hold. Andy Warhol certainly had other reasons for existence; if you compare one of Andy’s paintings from 1962 to his late ones, by my opinion, it’s just not there. All the artists looked in the newspapers and just picked out things.

I just saw a Lichtenstein show in Miami. He’s another case of someone who went on with the ingredients for a long time. But the great thing about Pop is you look at it and it just takes the words out of your mouth—you just can’t believe your eyes. It’s like the world stopped. It’s curious for me to hear what you say because I find that dealers get connected with a specific moment in art. Every art has its idols, its dealers and its cultures. Why shouldn’t Dick be a dealer of that moment? I think of him as being open to many moments. He also showed Minimal art—Robert Morris did his absolute best work with Dick. I know he appreciated Walter de Maria, and Kusama, who was not Pop. He really had something else that was outside the narrowness of one particular art movement.

JS: Dick was a great facilitator for many artists, particularly those he didn’t actually represent. Are there specific points in your own career when he made introductions, or played a role in any way?

RT: I don’t know of any examples. Every young artist—every young person—has a problem of being taken seriously. With Dick, he exuded information. Not only did he take *me* seriously but he took my art seriously, and that kind of support is incalculable in its meaning and its importance, not that it removed my doubts completely. I preferred not to know why he took my work seriously because I was scared it might be for the wrong reason. But you’re not privileged to have the right reasons or maybe you can’t handle reasons other than your own. There are hundreds of little interactions in the art world.

When I had attention given to my work, people thought it was time to make a show. Dick’s Green Gallery was certainly one of the galleries that I thought to approach. But because I was working at Betty Parsons and I considered them friends, I thought it would be really insulting to go someplace else before I at least spoke to Betty, and so I never got to Dick.

JS: Ah, so you asked Betty first.

RT: Yes, she had already announced that she would never give a show to someone younger than 35 and I didn't have any hope; asking her was just a courtesy. But then she said to me, "Oh Richard, do you really want to get involved in all this?" She never said yes or no to the show. I said "yes," which I did in a very, very small voice, but that was our contract.

JS: Do you remember Dick coming in to see shows at the Betty Parsons Gallery?

RT: I do—they were carefully chosen, and that's another nice thing about him. He exercised his attentions with a lot of discrimination in general. He would come to see Ad Reinhardt's shows, for example.

And with Dick, it's also important to say that—what's that phrase, that he followed his own drummer? I can't tell you how encouraging that is. So many people follow their ears or they follow their art magazines. No one can be 100% right about art; there's always going to be mistakes—and serious mistakes too—but to find somebody who has the confidence to accept those risks rather than using some media service or something that promises to tell you 100%. Many services do make these outrageous promises to which a weaker person will fall victim. Dick was unbelievably sensitive, delicate and extremely refined. But he was strong—the strongest part of him was his belief in following his own way with art. In later years, I think he knew that he was on the wrong trail, but he still followed it and didn't give up on it. That's why people love him today.

JS: You had begun to tell me about a time you came to a show at the Green Gallery and said to Dick that you liked the art on view, and he said to you, "Oh, do you like that?" and that you found that a strange comment for a gallerist, who presumably liked it himself or he wouldn't be showing it.

RT: Yes, that gallery, that room was a place where I at least could have a true art response. It wasn't that I might assume *he* had the same art response—he put all of those things out in the room. What was more interesting for him was to make a room where other people could have an art response and that that was so permissible and signed with such permissibility as for him to be able to say, "Oh, do you like that?" a knowing, multi-dimensioned statement. It meant that he knew that I had responded, and that that was not only OK, but was in fact a wonderful thing.

He gave to this space, this room, a kind of freedom. If you're a person who needs art, who is desperate to have art in your life, there's hardly any place in this world where you can go to get it. In museums even now, I have to memorize and then run out and take a walk in a park and redigest them in order to have my art experience because, if you just feel that something terrible will happen to you because it is not permissible public behavior.

Dick with this humanity, he was a large enough person to make this room—just one room where people could go—they would be invited to have an art response, which means he knew what that was, and that it defined a gallery. It's not a boutique; it's not a shop; it's not a place where you're supposed to go through a code of behavior.

When you have such a room like that, it's a freedom, the most delicious freedom there is. It's what defines what freedom is. I say that art is an untamable natural force and to have it you have to accept that it's untamable. It goes back to the Greeks. Their definition in our culture is based on the definition of matter which is so all-inclusive as to allow an art response, for example. But we veer off from that definition this way and that way and when someone comes along who is large enough to define matter that allows, that's how Dick found his way into western culture.