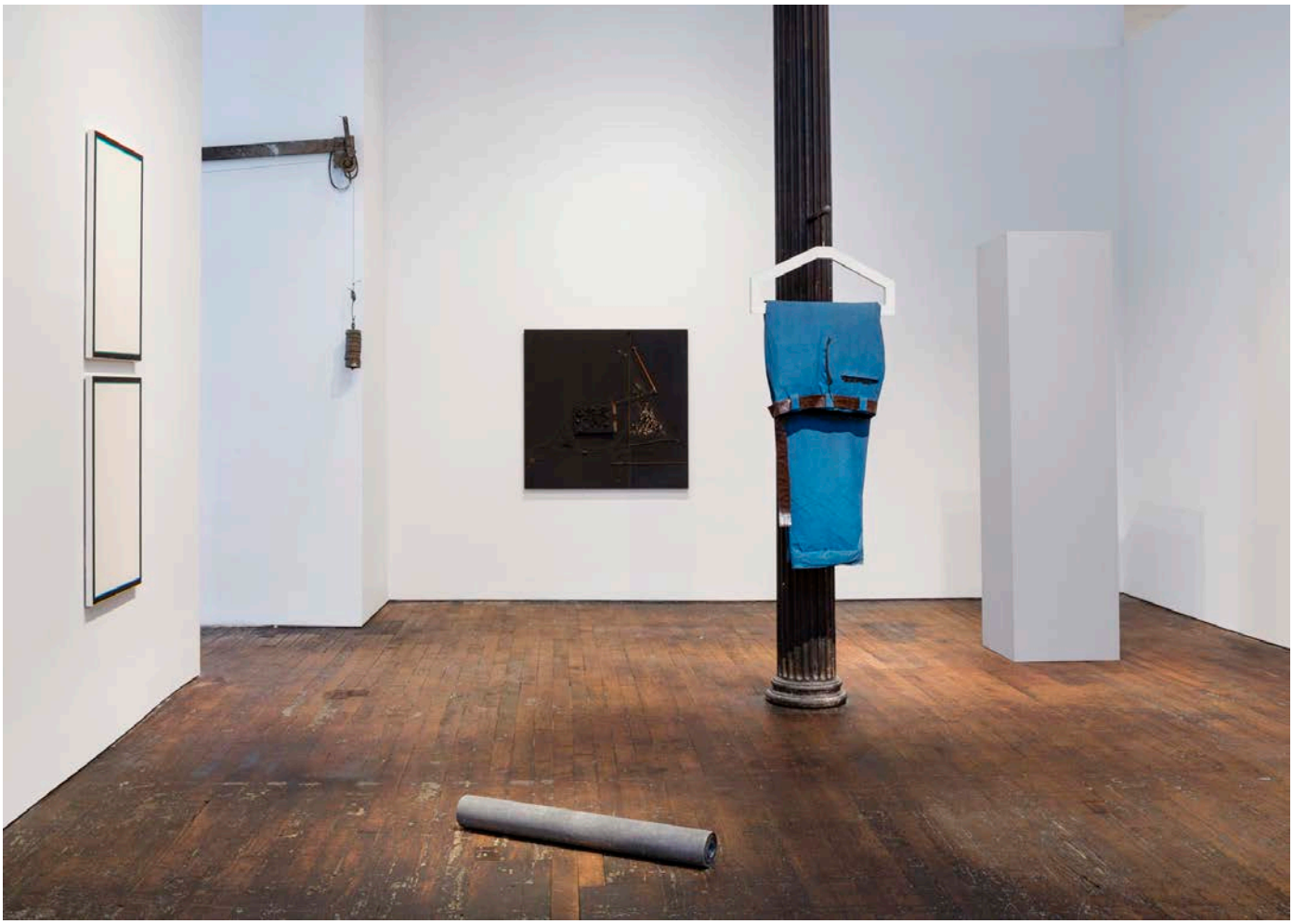
The New York Times

When Dealers, Too, Were Romantics

By KAREN ROSENBERG SEPT. 14, 2017



"Dealers are as important as the artists themselves," the gallery owner Leo Castelli once said. "He cannot exist without us, and we cannot exist without him." Gendered language aside, Castelli's remark captures the fragile symbiosis between those who make art and those who sell it.

Lately, however, dealers have been having trouble keeping up their end of this relationship — that is to say, just existing. Each month seems to bring a new closing announcement from an adventurous small or midsize gallery hobbled by, among other things, rising rents and multiplying art-fair expenses. In August, for instance, the dealer Jean-Claude Freymond-Guth circulated a candid letter announcing the demise of his nine-year-old Zurich gallery — citing, in place of the usual moving-on platitudes, "the consequences for art in an increasingly polarizing society ultimately built on power, finance and exclusion."

Into this anxious moment comes a wistfully romantic portrait of the postwar dealer Richard Bellamy, a passionate advocate for contemporary art and a notably indifferent businessman. “Deadeye Dick: Richard Bellamy and His Circle,” at Peter Freeman, Inc., lionizes Bellamy and his bohemian milieu — emphasizing the brief early-1960s tenure of the Green Gallery he founded on West 57th Street — while inviting some cleareyed judgments about the realities of running a gallery today.

Bellamy, who died in 1998 at 70, saw himself not as an entrepreneur, but as “an observer who just happens to be in a position to give exhibitions to people.” Yet his best years were, as Mr. Freeman recalled during the show’s installation, “the moment when the art market as we know it today came to be.”

Speculative collecting, artist-poaching and frothy press coverage were as much signs of the times as Bellamy’s thrift-store outfits, afternoon benders and unheated Lower East Side apartments. The Green Gallery would not have been in business without the backing of the taxi magnate Robert Scull and his wife, Ethel, who would scandalize the art world a decade or so later with a high-profile auction of works from their contemporary art collection that looked like greedy profit-taking to the artists they had supported. (“Deadeye Dick” nods to the Sculls in a set of mischievously Warholesque portraits by Michael Heizer.)

Organized by Judith Stein, whose evocative biography of Bellamy, “Eye of the Sixties,” was published last year along with a collection of the his correspondence edited by his son Miles, the show is a vivid affirmation of Bellamy’s “eye.” If the book, which delves into his drinking and his troubled relationships, can make him seem like a tragically contrarian figure — “the wrong man at the right time,” as the painter Larry Poons put it — the exhibition lets us judge him on the merits of his discoveries.

They include Donald Judd, Dan Flavin and Claes Oldenburg, who all made their New York solo debuts at the Green. They're represented at Freeman by audacious early works like Mr. Oldenburg's "Giant Blue Men's Pants" from his 1962 outing, a pair of enormous painted-canvas slacks casually draped over a hanger; and Mr. Flavin's 1964 light piece "a primary picture," made of red, yellow and blue fluorescent bulbs arranged to resemble an empty frame. "Deadeye Dick" almost makes you feel like you're encountering these pieces for the first time — a rare feat, given the current blue-chip status of these artists and their hushed presentation in big museums and mega-galleries.

Other, less familiar names are given equal billing, which is heartening because it would have been all too easy to convene a winners-only exhibition. A 1956 wood, gravel and metal relief painting by Jean Follett (one of few women on the Green roster) makes an earthy, Jean Dubuffet-like impact. And the painter and critic Sidney Tillim pays tribute to his fellow art writer Clement Greenberg in his mysterious allegory "Who Among Us Really Knows? Or Greenberg's Doubt," from 1969.

Portraits of Bellamy are here too, attesting to his intensity and charisma. He sat for Alex Katz in a kind of attentive slouch, head cocked just slightly and shoulders askew. Not here, alas, is Roy Lichtenstein's painting of a military officer musing in a speech bubble: "I am supposed to report to a Mr. Bellamy. I wonder what he's like."

How might we characterize Bellamy's taste, on the basis of "Deadeye Dick"? Early works by Robert Morris, Richard Serra, Bruce Nauman and Mark di Suvero (the subject of the Green's first solo, and one of just a handful of artists Bellamy represented at the time of his death) evince an intuitive response to sculpture. His painting sensibilities are harder to define, with bracingly austere abstract works by Mary Corse, Myron Stout and Jo Baer offset at Freeman by the helter-skelter figuration of Jan Müller's "Temptation of Saint Anthony" (1957).

A selection of ephemera confirms that Bellamy was way out front in fostering participatory and performative projects like Oldenburg's pop-up "Store" on the Lower East Side (1961) and the duo of Tehching Hsieh and Linda Montano's "Art/Life One Year Performance" (1983-4), conducted partly in Bellamy's final gallery venture, Oil & Steel, which began in TriBeCa.

When it came to closing deals, however, Bellamy lagged behind contemporaries like Sidney Janis and Castelli. "There was no real thinking about the business aspect, or what a stable of artists means, or what a dealer does to promote them apart from sitting there and trying to sell a painting every time someone asks the price of it," Bellamy later acknowledged. Often in the Green Gallery years, Ms. Stein writes, he wasn't even "sitting there"; he was napping in the back room, or out at a bar, having taken the gallery's phones off the hook.

How would this reluctant salesman have fared in today's hyper-professionalized art world, our society, per Mr. Freymond-Guth, of "power, finance, and exclusion"? Would Bellamy have scouted studios in Mexico City and Berlin, opened a branch in Los Angeles and another in Brussels? Would he have done all the fairs, monitored the contemporary auctions, wooed new collectors on Instagram, hired a public relations team?

I think we know the answer.