

## ARTnews

### ‘My Work Can Make People Say Stupid Things’: A Talk With Richard Tuttle

By Bill Powers | May 6, 2017



Richard Tuttle. PHOTO BY GARY MANKUS/COURTESY PACE GALLERY

**Bill Powers:** You were telling me about your town house on Vandam Street.

Richard Tuttle: Aaron Burr used to live on the corner. He actually left his house here and rowed across the Hudson River for his famous duel with Alexander Hamilton. The truth of it is that both Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr are relatives of mine.

**BP:** That’s incredible. Somebody’s been on ancestry.com, huh?

RT: My brother found out. There’s a book about the family.

**BP:** Your house looks very much the way I imagine it might have originally.

RT: I find a polarity when dealing with old houses between restoration and renovation. I’m very much of the restoration mindset.

**BP:** I would think that an artist might naturally lean more toward renovation, you know, in the spirit of invention.

RT: I personally have two sets of roots. I attach myself to the Betty Parsons Gallery, that generation of Abstract Expressionists. The other set of roots would be the concerns of my own generation.

**BP:** Is Brice Marden considered part of your generation?

RT: He’s more of a Minimalist. When people talk about the 1960s as a revolutionary period my question is always, “Where’s the bang?”

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Yes, there were riots on campus, but in the art world the change was so subtle. The Minimalists' achievement was to give us form, to make the transition from space to form. Somebody like myself comes along and I saw my job to characterize form.

**BP: So then you would be defined as a Post-Minimalist?**

RT: I think I was part of a new historic cycle. In 1975—around when I had my controversial Whitney show—we switched from the experiential to the image.

**BP: Which makes sense given the emergence of the Pictures Generation. Can you give me another example?**

RT: Take someone like Agnes Martin, who made these grid paintings, and then she stopped. When she started painting again, it was different. The grid ones were about the experiential, the stripe ones were about image. Artists have their antennae up.

**BP: Artists can have a predictive power. Almost how some people use the term speculative fiction in place of science fiction?**

RT: If you really want to get it on, we can talk about speculative realism, which is taking over from the conceptual discussion. It's very much object-oriented. Now speculation has always been a part of philosophy and realism has always been a part of the world, but no one ever thought to put them together.

**BP: Your show at the Whitney Museum is the one Marcia Tucker famously got fired over.**

RT: But if you look at what people were actually saying, they had something totally different in their minds. Like when Hilton Kramer said less has never been less. That's not what it was about at all. My work can make people say stupid things and I've never liked that about it. There was a lot of confusion going on. I've always done things the wrong way: my work is meditative, it's quiet, it doesn't sell well.

**BP: What are you up to these days?**

RT: I have to give a lecture in Boulder next month, "In Praise of Islam." I've done a series of lectures. The last one was "In Praise of Puritanism." It's at the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics. It takes incredible research to stage these talks.

**BP: Can you give me a preview?**

RT: Well, one thing I find is how Western and Asian cultures are predominantly about the daytime. Correspondingly we are afraid of the night. When we put our kids to bed we say prayers over them. There's a terrible fear of the night in Christianity and Buddhism and Judaism. On the other hand, Islam loves the night, maybe because it's so hot in those countries during the day. If you read the Koran there are many revelations at night. I want people to temporarily suspend whatever issues they may have with Islam and just go for the good stuff. Look, when Islam is fused with other cultures it's inspired some of the greatest feats of humanity: the Taj Mahal, for example.

**BP: Your daughter had a show at Jack Tilton gallery this year. What was that experience like for you?**

RT: You should look at our refrigerator; it's covered with her reviews, announcements, and photographs.

**BP: Can we pinpoint other pivotal moments in American art to explain where we find ourselves now?**

RT: Since Jackson Pollock, New York art has been about one thing: recording movement makes space. And that space is a social space, a social space needed for the kind of democracy we're trying to live in. Then if you look at something like the happenings of Allan Kaprow, the person inside that space actually became art.

**BP: How are people victimized by modernism?**

RT: It promises that you can have an evenly lit wall when the truth is that we see much better in half-light. Modernism wants the artwork to be in a restricted time and space, which is total crap. What's the point? Art delivers its message over time.

**BP: Does nature hate a straight line?**

RT: Everybody operates as if there's a straight line in front of them, even in language. It's important to know that this line is an illusion, which is the essence of what Leonardo da Vinci was saying. The job of an artist is to contradict yourself.

**BP: Does your retrospective at Pace give you pause looking back?**

RT: Suddenly I find that I want people to see my work. I guess you could call that a position I'm taking. I feel like something good happens when people see my work.