

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

ARTFORUM

Richard Artschwager

1923–2013

ED RUSCHA

WHEN I SAW Richard's Formica works in the mid-1960s, I was amazed. There's something about Formica—it seemed like the wonder surface of the day. (But it always made my palms itch.) Taking that on was a very brave thing for an artist to do. There must have been something in Richard that made him go for this new material. He saw some possibility in it and acted on it. The way he made the edges come together and mitered them: He was a master at that. And he was fortunate to have the skills of a finish carpenter; he knew all those little angles. He did lots of sharp corners and that sort of thing. He wasn't a great believer in Minimalism, I don't think, but what he made commented on Minimalism.

Richard was mindful of the functional aspect of furniture. He just took it to another area, and he was so good at it. Recently, paging through a book, I was surprised by a picture of a strange piece of his—it looks like an animal skin stretched over long pieces of wood—which turned out to be a functional chair. And he mixed things up by painting on top of fiberboard and Celotex and weird scumbly Formica surfaces, and so his furniture and his painting almost blend together.

Richard always asked himself the hard questions. Like: "How do I get inspiration?" And his answer was, "Well, I always just look around, and I ask myself, 'What do I pick up on?' And then I go from there." That was an entirely new, wholly original way of saying what every artist is trying to say. I woke up to that and realized he was onto something good. We kind of spoke the same language. He understood, I think, that art is a visual medium, not a verbal medium, and that you can

talk about something forever, but really, the work is there to look at, isn't it?

ED RUSCHA IS A LOS ANGELES–BASED ARTIST.

STEVEN HOLL

I LOVE TO WORK in the haptic realm and I'm very invested in the rich, authentic materiality of things like wood and concrete, so I hate plastic. I have to admit, then, that in some ways I disliked the first works of Richard's that I saw, which were his Formica furniture pieces. I hated the idea of a sculpture just being this big Formica thing. But as I kept looking, I was forced to reconsider. Richard used what I thought were disgusting materials, but his wry, iconoclastic sense transformed them. In a way, his work is about inversion: Everything you think you know gets turned on its side. As he once said, "Sculpture is for the touch, painting is for the eye. I wanted to make a sculpture for the eye and a painting for the touch." That's pure Richard.

After that first encounter I knew I had to talk to him about his work, and I was fortunate to develop a close relationship with him that spanned several decades. He was a great interlocutor, always open, generous, and enthusiastic about collaboration. We worked together on several major projects, such as the large figure, *Sitting*, that he made for the art building I designed for the University of Iowa in 2006; or the 2011 show of his work I helped him put together at "T" Space, a gallery I designed and which is run by Susan Wides in Dutchess County, New York. But our ongoing dialogue was as significant to me as these specific projects. We had long conversations about his early years as a furniture maker,

his roots in craft and building, which I think were important in his work but were also subverted and transfigured by the enigmatic, layered quality of its inventions and associations. I was always inspired by the way he merged thought and process, pursuing conceptual projects and constructing material things. He was constantly exploring a balance between the two, and that is what made his work exciting and unpredictable.

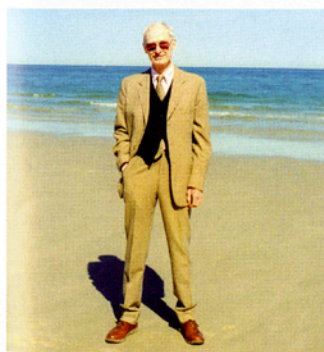
I also had important conversations with Richard about making spaces for art. Even before his show at "T" Space, he was involved with the project from the beginning, advising on the design. I've spoken to many artists about exhibition space over the years; Richard Nonas once told me, "My art needs an orthogonal white wall that meets the floor at a right angle." And Vito Acconci said, "Make the gallery as strange as you can, because

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Everything you think you know gets
turned on its side.**

my art needs something to react to." Richard was always more open. For him there were no absolutes or preconceptions about what space has to be. His attitude helped me understand how thoughtfully designed spaces could become instruments with which to explore new possibilities for art, and it also allowed him continually to respond to space in new ways. I've seen a lot of his shows, and they are always different, thanks to the incredible variety and flexibility of his artworks. Think of the *Splat* pieces, which can go in the corner high up in the room; or *Exclamation Point (Chartreuse)*, 2008, which can hang anywhere and take over any space it enters; or the *blps*, which literally spread his work around the city. In fact, when the Whitney did his retrospective this year, I commissioned a *blp* to be painted on a huge smokestack outside of my office, so I have a permanent Richard Artschwager. I hope it will be there forever. □

STEVEN HOLL IS PRINCIPAL OF STEVEN HOLL ARCHITECTS, WITH OFFICES IN NEW YORK AND BEIJING.

Richard Artschwager, 2008.
Photo: Ann Artschwager.



Left: Richard Artschwager,
Portrait II, 1963, Formica
on wood, 68 x 26 x 13".



Richard Artschwager, *blp*, 2012,
enamel paint. Installation view,
Tenth Avenue at West Thirtieth
Street, New York.

