
Anton van Dalen, Saul Steinberg's Assistant

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Upon arriving in New York from his native Holland there were two men that a young artist Anton van Dalen was determined to meet. One was Weegee, the New York street photographer, and the other was Saul Steinberg, the cartoonist and artist. Unannounced, van Dalen called upon Weegee at his Hell's Kitchen apartment and to his surprise was invited to spend about an hour. Conversely, Steinberg, who he blindly telephoned (as he was listed in the phone book) proved a bit more elusive, but persistence paid off and van Dalen was eventually invited to his apartment for a two-hour visit. With these goals achieved, van Dalen was content to follow his artistic career but fate intervened. A few months after their initial meeting van Dalen ran into Steinberg on 57th Street and was invited to the opening of his exhibition at the Sidney Janis Gallery. It was here that Steinberg asked van Dalen if he could recommend someone to work as his assistant. To which the young artist said, "let me do it, I will do anything." And so began (at his studio at 33 Union Square West, the same building as Andy Warhol's "Factory") a thirty-year working relationship that would have made van Dalen the envy of many artists, if only they knew. Instead it was a closely guarded secret. Given Steinberg's want for privacy and van Dalen's need not to be totally overshadowed as an artist, only a few confidants were ever told about this daily whereabouts. In turn Steinberg so trusted van Dalen that he became the beneficiary of certain artifacts and his one-on-one tutorials (although van Dalen's artwork shows no overt Steinbergian characteristics). After Steinberg died in 1999 van Dalen inherited his entire library and some of the tables and chairs from his studio. Last year, after keeping this secret for so long, he decided that it was time to tell-all, but to celebrate his employer through a showing of books, drawings, sketches, printed matter, and other work that sheds more light on Steinberg's passions. Yet rather than exhibit at a museum or gallery, van Dalen decided to mount the show at The School of Visual Arts in order to introduce Steinberg to a brand new generation. In this interview van Dalen talks openly about the role Steinberg played in his life and the intimate side few people have seen or read about.

Heller: You were born and raised in Holland, when did you become aware of Steinberg's work?

van Dalen: I was introduced to Steinberg's art at thirteen by my older brother who studied at the Rietveld Academy of Art in Amsterdam. The innovation Steinberg brought to us was the idea of drawing with a single line, no shading, etc. We were struck by the graphic clarity of his art and the worldly use of various drawing techniques, but mostly by the exuberance and boundless curiosity of his mind. In 1954, when I was 16 years old, my family immigrated from Holland to Toronto, and it was there that I saw his just published book, *The Passport*, which