Storr, Robert, “Just Exquisite? The Art of Richard Tuttle,” *Artforum*, November 1997, pp. cover, 87-93

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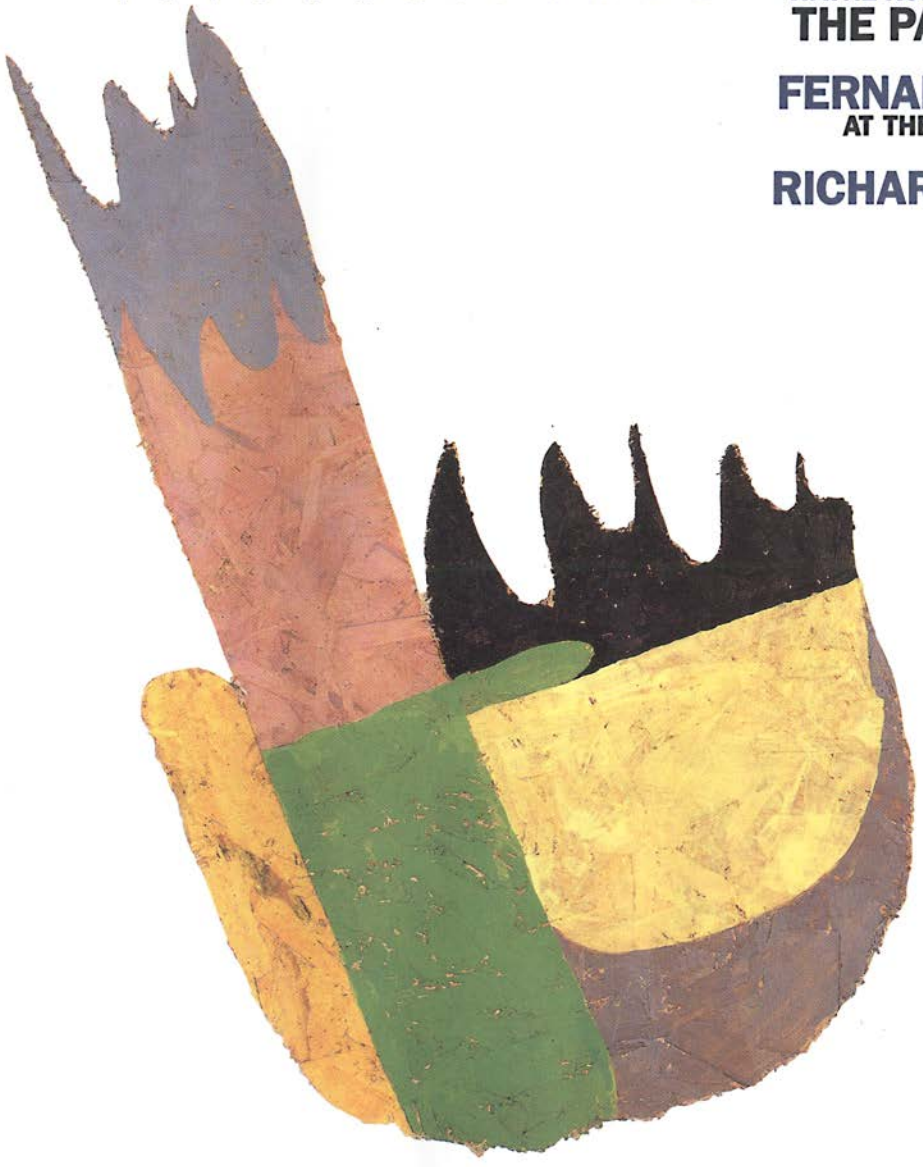
WAYNE KOESTENBAUM ON
THE PAPARAZZI

FERNAND LÉGER
AT THE POMPIDOU

RICHARD TUTTLE



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ROBERT STORR

JUST EXQUISITE?

THE ART OF RICHARD TUTTLE

The ’90s have never really declared themselves. Exceptions noted—Matthew Barney, for example—the best art to emerge in the decade has been physically modest and antirhetorical. That’s reasonable enough, given the grandstanding of the ’80s. In place of massive canvases, reliefs, or bronzes, artists such as Tom Friedman have favored materials like typing paper, masking tape, and bubblegum; instead of

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crisp layouts, press type, Photostats, and various state-of-the-art advertising techniques, Raymond Pettibon has stuck to hand lettering and drawing on dog-eared or otherwise distressed sheets of paper. And despite the sometimes vast scale of his installations, you may find Ilya Kabakov's dystopian worldview succinctly summarized in a single dangling specimen composed of string, wire, and assorted found objects or in a crumpled ball of tissue paper lying inconspicuously on the floor near the baseboard molding of a SoHo gallery with a brief didactic label explaining the inevitability of the object's lowly status.

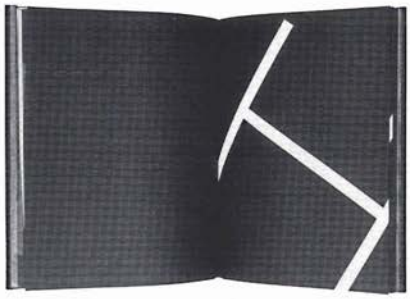
The last piece was part of the New York version of a seminal 1990 exhibition organized by Ralph Rugoff for the Rosamund Felsen Gallery in Los Angeles and retooled in 1992 for an East Coast audience at American Fine Arts in New York. The show's title, "Just Pathetic," has since become the only distinctive '90s art moniker to stick. The new sensibility Rugoff defined offered an X-ray-accurate diagnosis of the period's symptomatic discontents. "Whenever failure to successfully conform can be attributed to a lack of mastery and self-control, to a laughable powerlessness, that behavior is in danger of being labeled pathetic. To be pathetic, in other words, is to be a loser, haplessly falling short of the idealized norm. Art which embraces the pathetic voluntarily wallows in this embarrassing territory. While all art risks failing, pathetic art makes failure its medium."

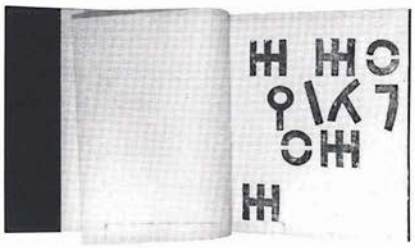
Though theory-ready types immediately jumped on Rugoff's idea to claim it in the name of the "abject," Georges Bataille, and still fancier discourses, what they missed entirely was Rugoff's tone. And when it comes to pegging the zeitgeist, tone is everything. Whether American adolescent fears and obsessions (as in the work of Pettibon or Mike Kelley) or simply a hostility to the grand manner (as is true for Kabakov and David Hammons) was more at issue in the show, the point is that all these artists turned their back on high style and the career strategies that go along with it.

THE CONNECTION MARCIA TUCKER PERCEIVED BETWEEN "AMBITIOUS" ART AND AMBITIOUSLY "UNAMBITIOUS" ART LINKS TUTTLE OF 1975 TO CONTEMPORARY ANTIHEROIC TENDENCIES.

Which brings me, in a roundabout way, to Richard Tuttle, the subject of two shows in New York last year. A miniretrospective at the New York Public Library, a corridor-filling gem coorganized by Robert Rainwater, chief librarian for art, prints, and photographs, and freelance curator Robert Murdoch, featured almost fifty examples of the artist's books, prints, and multiples from 1965 through 1995. Meanwhile, a show at Sperone Westwater presented new paintings on jigsaw-cut wafer board in addition to ten "classic" Tuttles spanning roughly the same period as the library show. Among them were a beautiful glyphlike shaped wood relief from 1965, another letter-form dyed canvas hanging from 1967, an octagonal paper piece almost imperceptibly adhered to the wall with wheat paste from 1970, and a small, ankle-high, wall-hugging plywood slat, painted white along one edge, from 1974.

Having shown quietly in galleries starting in the mid '60s, Tuttle was first introduced to the general public in 1975 in a one-person exhibition at the Whitney Museum organized by Marcia Tucker. The radical unobtrusiveness of the work triggered shock waves that eventually resulted in Tucker's departure from the Whitney and her founding of the New Museum of Contemporary Art. As always, Hilton Kramer was on hand to sound the tocsin for those perennially antagonistic to fresh ideas. "To Mies van der Rohe's





Top to bottom: **Richard Tuttle, *Cloth Piece (Pale Orange "M")*, 1967,** dyed canvas, 38 ½ x 40". **Richard Tuttle, *Two Books*, 1969,** book in two volumes; vol. 1: ten leaves with ten screen-prints in white on black paper, vol. 2: thirty leaves with deconstructed square shape successively screen-printed in black, in black outline, and as a cutout on white paper; vol. 1: 12 ⅛ x 9 ¼", vol. 2: 12 ⅛ x 9 ¼". Printed by B. Wery, Cologne, Germany. Fifty copies for the artist, in addition to edition of two hundred. **Richard Tuttle, *Story With Seven Characters*, 1965,** book with eight woodcuts; binding: black paper over boards, edged with black tape; 12 ⅛ x 11 ¼". Printed, bound, and published by Richard Tuttle. Edition of seven.

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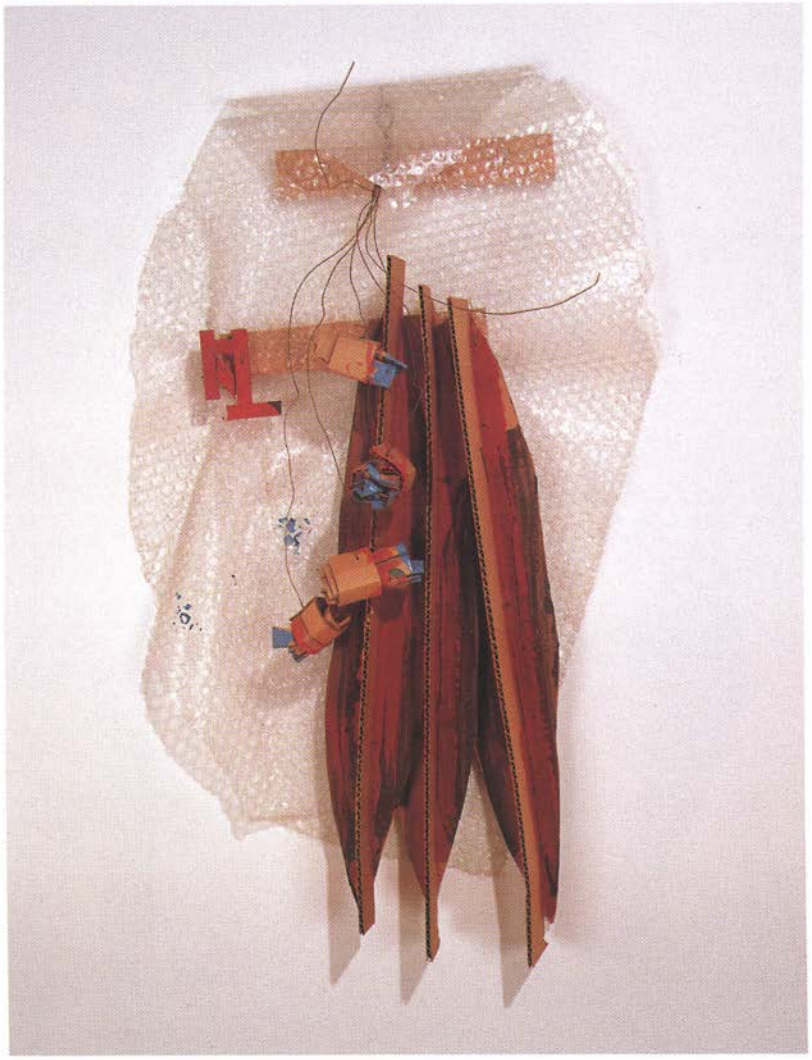

Clockwise from top left: **Richard Tuttle, *Line Piece 84*, 1992,** acrylic and graphite on paper, graphite, 2 ½ x 3 ½". **Richard Tuttle, *Two or More*, 1984,** bubble wrap, wood, staples, corrugated cardboard, paint, and wire, 30 ¼ x 18 ½ x 6". **Richard Tuttle, *Line Piece 82*, 1992,** watercolor on paper, graphite, 3 x 3".

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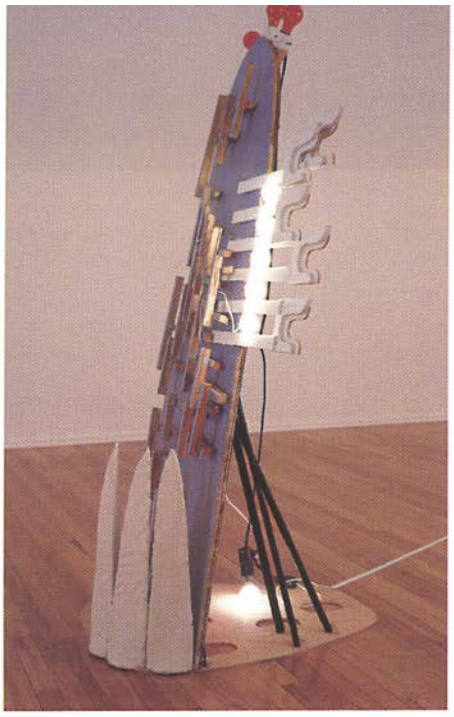
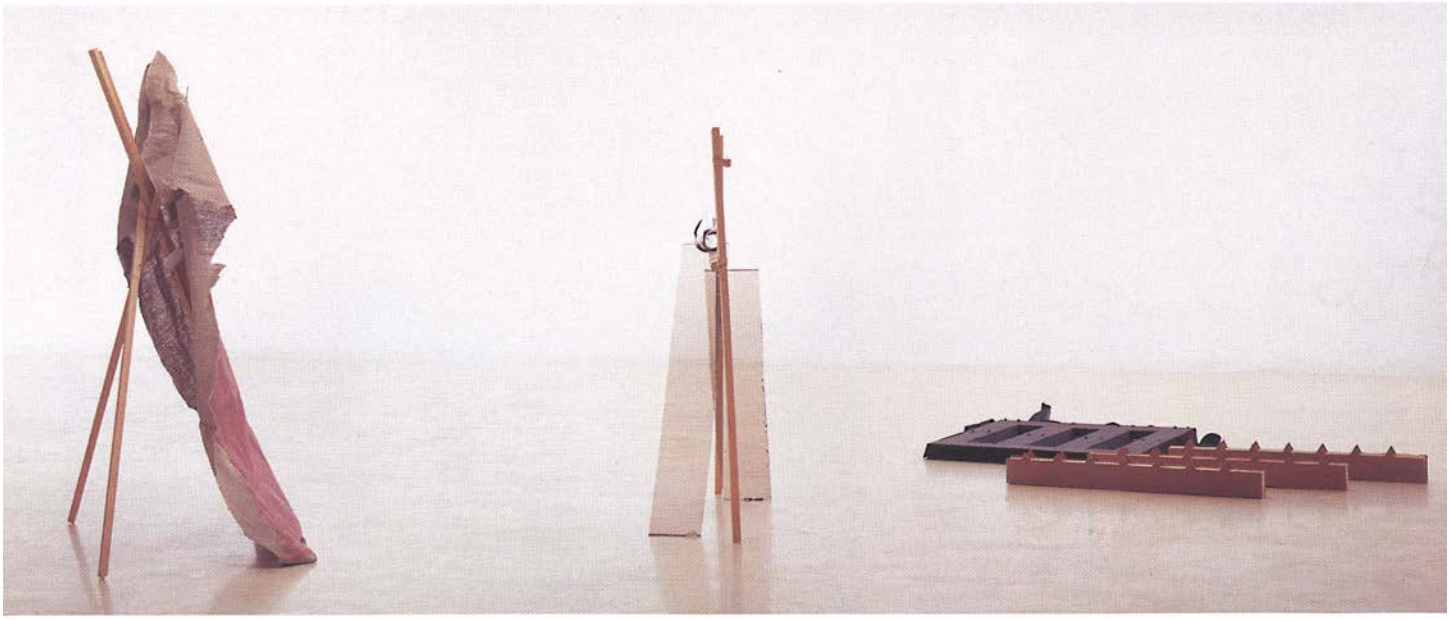
Clockwise from top left: **Richard Tuttle, *Sentences II*, 1989,** wood, natural pigments, enamel paint, canvas, metal with ceramic light fixtures, 21 ½ x 56 x 32". **Richard Tuttle, *Sentences III*, 1989,** acrylic paint, wood, ceramic light fixtures, and natural canvas, 72 x 42 x 35". **Richard Tuttle, *Turquoise III*, 1988,** wood, canvas, acrylic paint, cardboard, Plexiglas, Styrofoam, fabric, and ribbon, 114 ⅜ x 98 ½ x 53 ½".





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famous dictum that less is more, the art of Richard Tuttle offers definitive refutation. For in Mr. Tuttle's work, less is unmistakably less. It is, indeed, remorselessly and irredeemably less. It establishes new standards of lessness, and fairly basks in the void of lessness. One is tempted to say that, so far as art is concerned, less has never been less than this." In the event, Kramer's pan was included in a selection of criticism Tucker included in the show's catalogue (published after the opening). And as is usually the case, Kramer accurately signaled the importance of the occasion by denying it had any.[1]

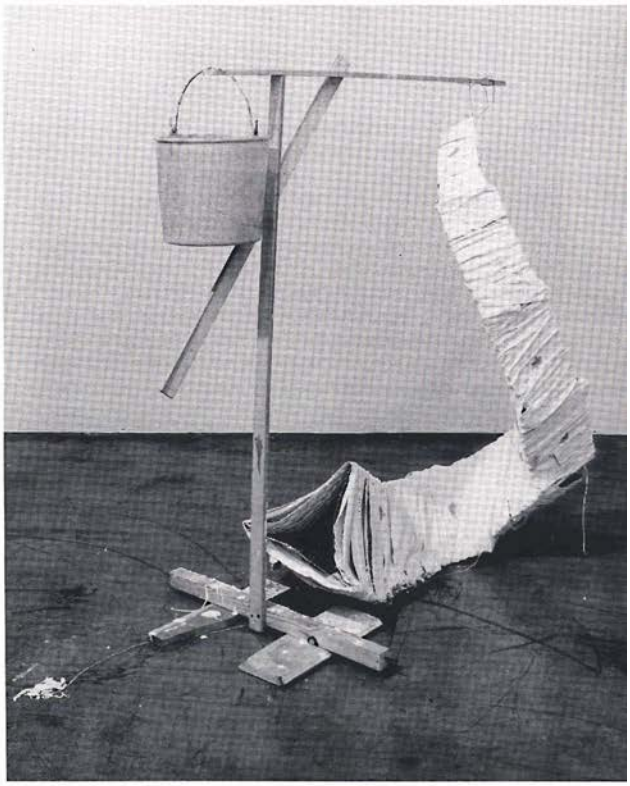
Prepared by Kramer's onslaught and buttressed by the better-informed and more sympathetic commentaries of John Perrault, Thomas Hess, and Lawrence Alloway, among others, Tucker chose to emphasize the provocative slightness of the artist's output. "The work of Richard Tuttle often shocks viewers with its offhandedness, its modest informality and its rough, impermanent look," she wrote. "Tuttle's pieces are insistent; their often small size, visual frailty and blatant disregard for the kind of technical refinement found in 'major' art stubbornly, even perversely command attention. These pieces are so removed from the attitudes and modes of working found in the art of most of Tuttle's peers that their individuality alone constitutes, for many viewers, an offense in itself."

Nowhere is the word "pathetic" used in the critical debate surrounding the Whitney show, but the connection Tucker and others perceived between "ambitious" art and ambitiously "unambitious" art links Tuttle of 1975 to contemporary antiheroic tendencies. And it positions him as an aesthetic "elder" in many ways comparable to Bruce Nauman, whose polymorphous assaults on mandarin style and sentiment have had so profound an effect on recent practice. Nauman's analytic anger resonates with that of Pettibon, Kelley, and their soul mates, while Tuttle's idiosyncratic finesse is echoed by that of Friedman, with whom he also shares a temperamental serenity, and, at times, by that of Hammons and Kabakov.

BY MEANS OF HIS MATERIALS, TUTTLE HAS GONE ABOUT ELABORATING THE ABSOLUTE "LESSNESS" OF HIS EARLY WORK TO THE POINT OF QUIRKY EXCESS.

Whether its materials consist of bottle caps nailed in the thousands to telephone poles, fried chicken wings ornamentally attached to cast-off carpeting, or cigarette butts impaled on bent coat hangers like candles set into a sconce, Hammons' work is as ingeniously decorative as it is socially rooted. In much the same way, messiness was never so artful as it is in Kabakov's ghostly still-lifes of communal kitchens and squalid Soviet SROs. Karen Kilimnik's hodgepodge tableaux and scatter pieces mix deftness and dilapidation in ways not unrelated to Kabakov's—the cultural wasteland she commemorates occupied the opposite side of the iron curtain from the one he now re-creates. And, with their dynamic shape-shifting and sometimes Al Held–like grandiosity, Jessica Stockholder's jazzy interiors, facades, and junk-shop amalgams represent the upbeat contingent of the loose, and much larger, aesthetic community currently encamped in Tuttle's vicinity.

A generational chasm separates Tuttle from his '90s counterparts, however, not to mention a profound philosophical difference. A voluble as well as reflective man, Tuttle is devoted to ideas but seemingly untempted by systems building. A basically intuitive intellectual, he has not been disappointed by Modernism, as so many younger artists have, because art's compromising entanglements with the world have never been as interesting to him as its mutating genetic codes, according to which the simple chromosomes



Richard Tuttle, *There's No Reason a Good Man Is Hard to Find III*, 1988, chicken wire, wire, wood, plaster, fabric, spray paint, plastic bucket, and cement, 53 ¼ x 45 x 30".

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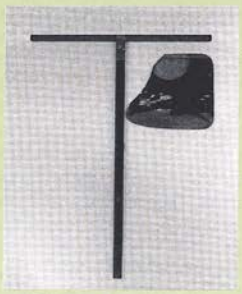
of his early work have mutated into wondrous organisms of recent years.

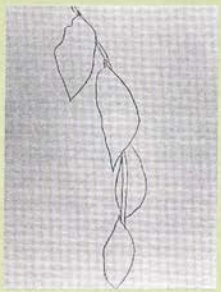
At heart, Tuttle is the lyric poet of the ephemeral. Books consume a large part of his energy, both as a reader and as a maker. (Pettibon is literate in similar measure.) A considerable number of those on display at the public library were catalogues for exhibitions; like the late Martin Kippenberger and Joseph Beuys before him, Tuttle has frequently acted as his own curator while assuming the prerogatives of the professional designer of posters and documentation for his art. Meanwhile, among the living, Tuttle's literary collaborators have included Larry Fagin, Barbara Guest, and Mei-mei Berssenbrugge (a poet he met in connection with a project sponsored by the Whitney Museum and later married); among the dead they count Auden, Yeats, Descartes, Spinoza, and Beuys.

The elegance of Tuttle's volumes—which often enough appear to have no volume whatsoever—is consistent with that of his drawings. Indeed, Tuttle treats typography, layout, and the various printing processes he employs as if he were making a drawing. The paper textures, tones, shapes, and edges, and the etched or lithographed embellishments he superimposes on them, are like the washes of his watercolors, as is his frequent use of pale, aqueous hues in these works. In much the same way, Tuttle's organic emblems may on occasion recall the "astral" signs of Theosophist Charles Webster Leadbeater and Annie Besant or the displaced symbols and hermetic patterns of Beuys, yet there's no hocus-pocus attached to his delicate icons and atmospheres. If anything Tuttle's work sounds a sympathetic chord with that of Blinky Palermo, who eschewed the symbolism of his teacher Beuys for an American-style abstraction in a deliberately minor key.

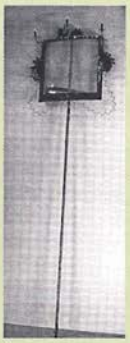
More attuned to pictorial than sculptural modes, Tuttle's mission seems to be to show that American-type painting could continue to emit its aura without the muscular statement or grand scale with which it is historically or mythically linked. Tuttle's slackening of gesture, softening of form, and objectification of fragility may be seen as relative to existing archetypes in the canon of postwar Modernism following Abstract Expressionism. Ellsworth Kelly, like Tuttle a former member of the Betty Parsons stable, hovers near the latter's shaped wooden paintings of 1965 and dyed cloth works of 1967, just as Kelly's abstract linear drawings of the '50s and early '60s—for example, *One Stroke*, 1962—foreshadow Tuttle's wire pieces of 1972. Alfred Jensen occupies a place in the vicinity of Tuttle's patterned insignias and rainbow scales of color. While Tuttle takes the starch out of Kelly, he takes the bulk out of Jensen. Meanwhile, Tuttle's affinity with Tony Smith, reinforced by his having worked on the fabrication of some of the late artist's large-scale sculptures, encompasses Smith's interest in the synthesis of organic and geometric form.

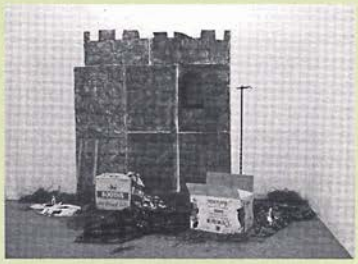
Tuttle's taste for contemporary materials locates him squarely in his own generation. To heavy-metal and building-block Minimalism, however, he has responded with lightweight synthetics: Styrofoam, acoustic ceiling tiles, Zip-lock baggies, cardboard packing of every description, corrugated paper, foils, wire mesh. Tuttle's palette is made up of the things you find at the bottom of an office drawer, on the floor of a Garment District sweatshop, or in the tins atop an amateur carpenter's table. Organic shapes are thus cut from or pieced together out of inorganic scraps of synthetic this and mass-produced that. Glue is another signature material, a vital ingredient in the studied messiness that first surfaced in a 1983 exhibition of Tuttle's reliefs at Blum Helman. He used glue as only a once-upon-a-time boy in this country could, with wispy, light-catching filaments dan-

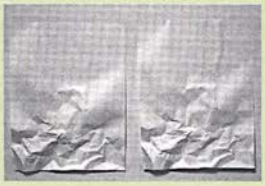


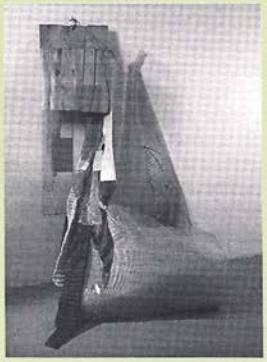


Left to right: **Blinky Palermo, *Tagtraum II (Nachtstück)* [Daydream II (Nightpiece)], 1966,** wood, canvas, and oil, ca. 60 ⅝ x 43 ¼ x 1 ½". **Ellsworth Kelly, *Lemon Branch*, 1964,** pencil on paper, 28 ½ x 22 ½".









Clockwise from upper right: **Karen Kilimnik, *Castle Gloom*, 1991,** fabric, paper, cardboard cartons, candles, iron candle stand, custom jewelry, photocopies, dried flowers, plastic miniature dogs, and cat collar, 75 x 92 x 55". Installation view. **Jessica Stockholder, 1996,** acrylic paint, oil paint on glass, wooden shingles, wire mesh, green wire, hardware, acrylic yarn, scarf, thread, and silicone caulking, 71 x 48 x 29". Installation view. Photo: Cathy Carver. **Tom Friedman, *Untitled*, 1990,** two sheets of paper, each 11 x 8 ½". **David Hammons, *Highfalutin*, 1990,** crystal candelabra, metal window frame, glass, wire, and rubber, dimensions variable. Installation view.

gling from the joined parts like the excess that oozes from the sutures of a plastic airplane assembled by an eager twelve-year-old. Tuttle has contributed to the long history of modern collage by subtly emphasizing the "*colle*" and, more broadly, the tenuousness of the bonds between sticky, stapled, stitched, or delicately placed but unattached parts.

By means of his ever-expanding list of raw or semiraw materials, Tuttle has gone about elaborating the absolute "lessness" of his early work to the point of quirky excess. Tuttle of the '60s and '70s evolved into Tuttle of the '80s and '90s in a manner parallel to the epochal shift from minimal to maximal art, but he never broke character. To the Baroque histrionics of neo-Expressionism, Tuttle answered with sometimes extravagant Rococo refinement. The work may be diminutive and emblematic, as in the tiny wall pieces he showed in Baden-Baden, flat-out-pictorial, as in the often lush acrylic and wafer-board paintings featured in his gallery show last fall and at the Venice Biennale this past summer, or nearly—but never quite—space devouring, as in his *Floor Drawings* of 1987–89, rambling mixed-media assemblages that look like pup tents, miniature-golf traps, or carnival concessions on a sunny morning after a windy night. (The decorative light bulbs found in some of these pieces correspond closely to Hammons' use of them in *Highfalutin*, 1985–90, and related pieces.) Tuttle's paradigms are roadside USA; his touch is epicurean. Rare is the American who can take his pleasure so guiltlessly or offer it with so few strings attached; in his art, those strings may dangle from the actual work.

To call Tuttle's work "precious"—a habitual cocktail-party and art-academy epithet—is to beg all the interesting questions. To make things simultaneously ephemeral and jewellike is to pit impermanence against permanence, everyday temporality against aesthetic timelessness. Japanese art of the high courtly tradition repeatedly did so; artists of the Rococo period celebrated the fleeting delights of their doomed aristocratic world in a related spirit. Tuttle's work is more improvisatory than its Japanese analogues and less melancholic or overtly frivolous than its seventeenth-century European ones. But he too is engaged in the serious business of making the most of things with the least exalted claim on our attention and the unlikeliest chances of long-term survival. In which case the prime emotion stirred in the viewer by Tuttle's elegant confections—beyond instinctive covetousness and despite puritanical suspicion—is vulnerability.

TO CALL TUTTLE'S WORK "PRECIOUS"—A HABITUAL COCKTAIL-PARTY AND ART-ACADEMY EPITHET—IS TO BEG ALL THE INTERESTING QUESTIONS.

Doubling back to the beginning, then, one can recognize in the damage-prone things that Richard Tuttle reveals to be "just exquisite" the favored twins of already-damaged things Ralph Rugoff finds "just pathetic." But where Rugoff's critical stance concerns the aesthetics of heightened lowliness and the liberating experience of zero expectations, Tuttle's low-grade materials are rendered highly sensuous, his disregard for summary statements bordering on the ecstatic. Coming from different places—and heading in different directions—Tuttle the undeterred romantic and his disabused '90s brethren meet at a juncture where the only truly hopeless propositions seem to be those straining for heroic impact. Their shared renunciation of this option lends the resulting work varying degrees of bittersweetness. While the conceptually astringent flavor of much "pathetic" art is individually seasoned with sentiment—Kabakov's nostalgia, Pettibon's "film-noir" homages, Hammons' visual blues riffs—Tuttle's work is sweet with

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Clockwise from top left: **Richard Tuttle, *Gold and Silver on Easy Pieces No. 8*, 1996,** wood 29½ x 24", long aluminum cone 8¼", white rope 45¼", wood, wire, and rope 14⅜ x 3¾". Six elements. **Richard Tuttle, *Gold and Silver on Easy Pieces No. 18*, 1996,** metal 30⅜ x 2¾", black metal cone 14⅜ x 2¾", painted bundle of branches, paper bag with rolled and tied pullover 17⅛ x 9⅜ x 5¼". Four elements. **Richard Tuttle, *Waferboard 5*, 1996,** acrylic on wafer board, 16 x 48".