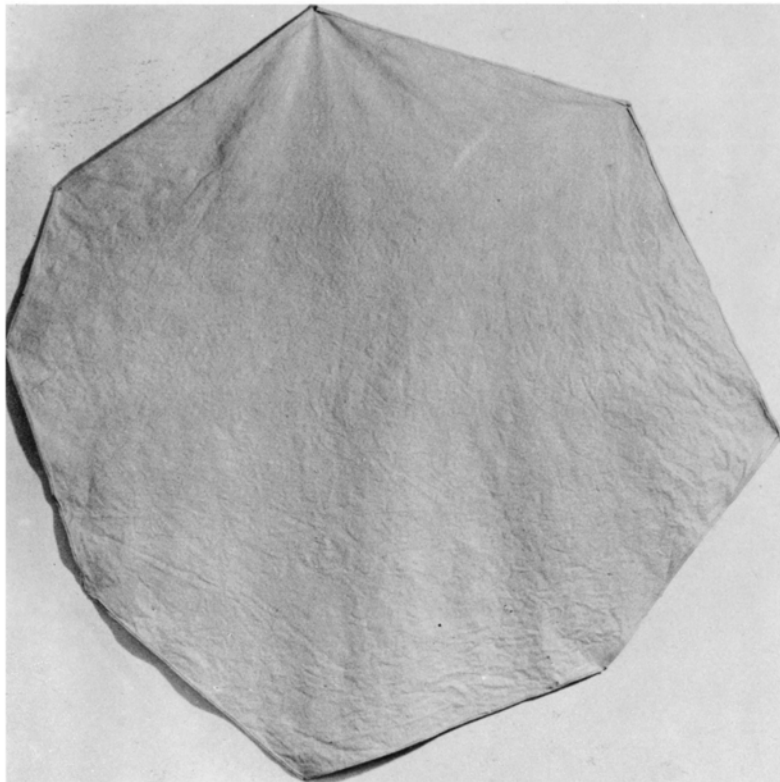


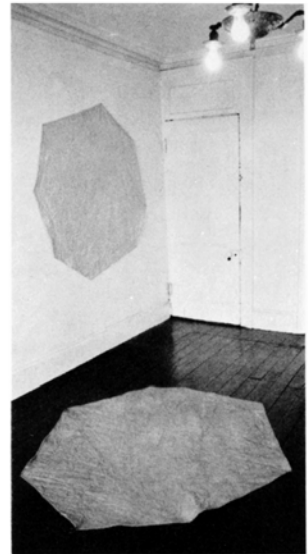
Pincus-Witten, Robert, "The Art of Richard Tuttle," *Artforum*, February 1970, pp. cover, 62-67



## THE ART OF RICHARD TUTTLE



Richard Tuttle. *Canvas*, ca. 54" dia. Betty Parsons Gallery.



Richard Tuttle, *Octagons*, studio view.

### ROBERT PINCUS-WITTEN

In 1967 Richard Tuttle dyed a group of irregularly shaped and hemmed canvas octagons in various pots of Tintex. Shortly thereafter, when they had dried and had been hand smoothed, they were limply pinned to the wall or laid upon the floor. It did not matter much in which way they were hung or where on the floor they were spread. (Exhibition photographs taken of the works are inscribed on the back "to be held any way.") The issue at hand was not primarily about figure/ground relationships (a further extenuation of Jean Arp's collages "arranged according to the laws of chance,") nor were Tuttle's octagons simply still more artifacts in a long line of Dada-inspired work, although their roots in Dada, and in Arp particularly, cannot be denied.

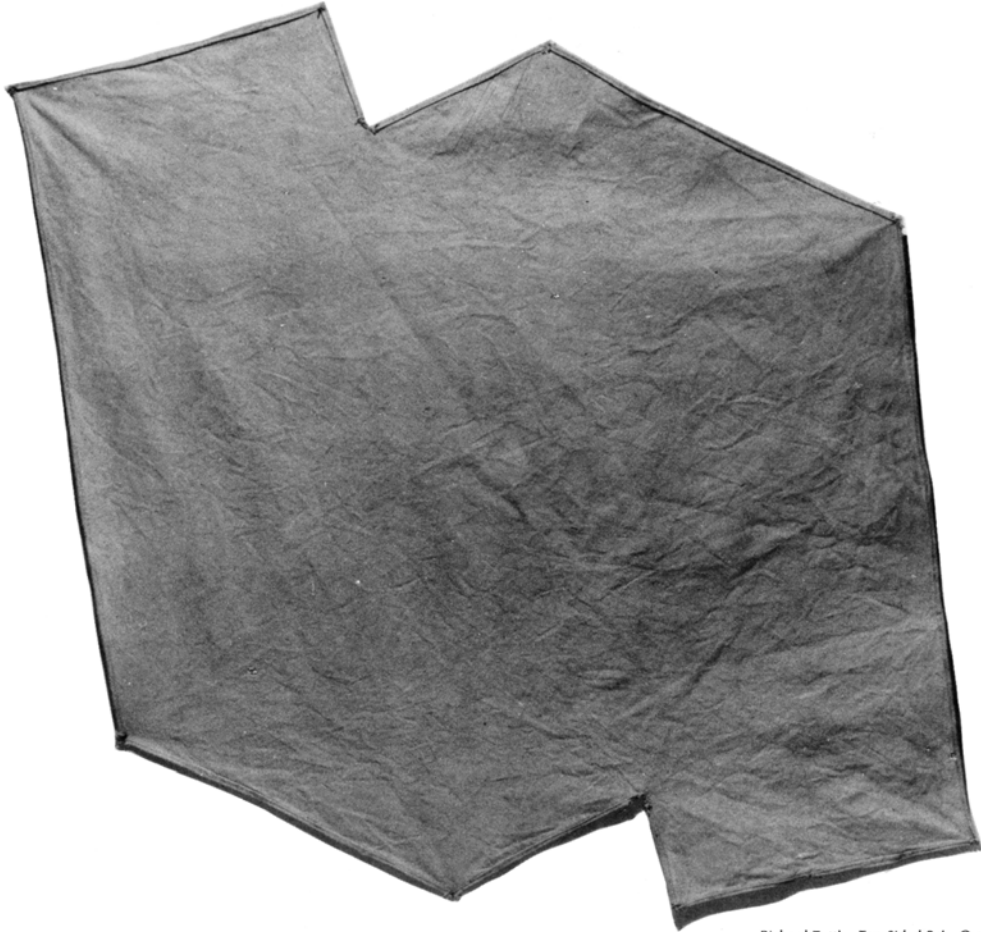
Serious criticism attempted to locate Tuttle among those artists interested in confounding divisions between sculpture and painting. He was thought of as fusing painting and sculpture into a new polymorph in which sheer tangibility and blunt materiality alluded to sculpture while the character of soaked-in-paint bespoke painting. Some writers assumed that Tuttle derived from an aspect of field painting as it was then known in the work of Frankenthaler, Louis, Noland and Olitski.

One critic, Emily Wasserman, attempted more. In addition to recognizing Tuttle's relationship to field painting, she also referred to an evolution out of the artist's earlier wooden reliefs and indicated in which way Tuttle's peculiar hermetism—"withdrawn" she said—differed from other equally oblique and factual artists, in particular Brice Marden, David Novros, Don Judd and Carl Andre. In Tuttle's work she observed ". . . a con-

cern for the sensuous and for a kind of chromatic fantasy . . . which are levelly denied by the work and thinking of his colleagues."<sup>1</sup>

For my part, I prefer to regard Tuttle's work in terms of its own organic evolution and the artist's personal experiences. Tuttle was born in Rahway, New Jersey, in 1941. His paternal line traces American roots to the early 17th century. The Tuttle had come here to be small landowners and originally cultivated farms near where Trinity Church now stands. Some Tuttle prospered. Others, like the artist's branch, did not. Richard Tuttle grew up in Roselle, New Jersey, "a rather poor town," the second son of four children. He went to Roselle High, part of a class that was unusual only because it was "brighter than most." The family was conservative. His grandmother, on his father's side, set a family tone of fundamentalist Presbyterianism. The artist's grandfather was "something of a dilettante who wrote,

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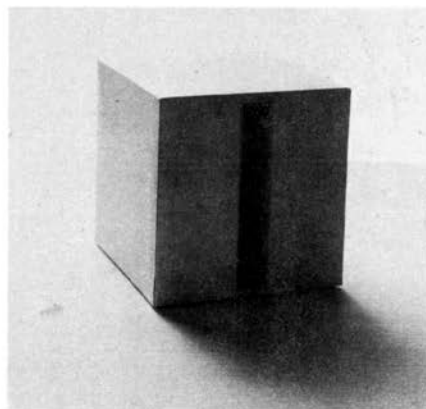
Richard Tuttle, *Ten-Sided Pale Orange Canvas*, 47½ x 62½", 1967.  
Betty Parsons Gallery.



63 Richard Tuttle, *First Green Octagon*, dyed canvas, 1967.



Richard Tuttle, untitled, 1968.



Richard Tuttle, Box (paper), 3" cube, 1964. Betty Parsons Gallery.

hand." The paper cubes stressed issues of incision, slotting, folding and cutting—of constructing—but with an oddly infant-like thrust to them quite different from the small, colored celluloid cubes of Lucas Samaras, which were shown during the same period at the now defunct Green Gallery. The 1965 wooden reliefs continued to explore these issues but exaggerated their consciously infantile quotient. The constructions were hollow, perhaps two inches thick. The reliefs were essentially ideograms of landscape or nature, treated in slightly amorphous contours and painted in single colors. They were supported by a nail which entered the work through a small hole in the back. The natural shorthand of the shapes—*Hill*, *Torso*, *Water*, *Fire*—were painted the blunt coloristic equivalent of the sense of the piece. *Water* was blue, *Fire* red, *Hill* grey and so on. In addition to their Arp-like qualities, the pieces also resembled the elements of a child's fitted jigsaw puzzle—large, squat, simplified shapes. The pieces were exhibited at the Betty Parsons Gallery in September, 1965 and several of the works were laid directly on the floor, the most extreme option open to contemporary sculpture working against the tradition of the vertical monolith.

Of the motifs, perhaps *Hill* is the most important. It describes a single, rainbow-like arc on the wall. A drawing of 1963, *Elephant*, nervously redepicts the arc of a vast and possibly protective elephantine mound or hump. This work is still drawn in terms of the delicate Trinity wood blocks, although its ritualizing "feel" is quite new in Tuttle's work.

The relationship of the 1965 ideogrammatic reliefs to the immensely important sculptural attitudes that were emerging in the 1960s is, of course, of greater moment. Constructivist practice—the attitude whereby the method of affixing element to element takes precedence over all other considerations in the execution of a work—first arose in Picasso's Synthetic Cubist assemblages of still-life material in 1913-1914. The intellectual artists of the Russian Revolution elevated this attitude into a style which came to be known as Constructivism. However remarkable the accruings possible to carving and modeling, Constructivist practice made evident the unmodernity of these earlier sculptural attitudes. It was not until the late '50s and early '60s that a viable alternative to Constructivism came into being, without, it is evident, supplanting it. It is a practice which receives its predicates from pictorial issues, from painting. There are numerous aspects of this radical option. There are, for example, sculptures which take on the color, texture and even the evanescence of painting and collage—Keith Sonnier's for example. Even more important than this, for Tuttle's work, is the kind of pictorializing sculpture which results when the depicted contour and the real contour of an image are congruent. This may take a representational form—a Flag by Johns—or a non-representational one—a lacquered plank by John McCracken. Such a

drew and experimented." He would make gifts of his drawings to his grandchildren on the condition that they would continue a square-to-square grid enlargement with which the drawing would be accompanied and which had already been begun. At length, Tuttle got to college, Trinity College, Hartford, an Episcopal school in which the artist found "little outlet for doing any creative work." During Tuttle's student days an exhibition at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, called "Black, White, and Grey," made a deep impression on the student, as did Agnes Martin, who had gone up to the museum to speak in connection with the exhibition. Shortly thereafter, Tuttle contacted Agnes Martin in New York to ask whether he might purchase one of her drawings. This inquiry marked the beginning of an important friendship. The highly ascetic, Minimalist persuasion of Martin's work is curious to admit in Tuttle at the time, although there may be the dim memory of grandfather's grids in all of this.

Very little remains from Tuttle's student days. He designed sets for student productions of *End Game*, *Zoo Story* and *American Dream*. (The emphasis on Edward Albee is partly explained by the fact that the author is an alumnus of Trinity.) Tuttle also designed two senior yearbooks. In examining *The Trinity Ivy* of 1963, the year Tuttle graduated and enlisted in the Air Force, one is struck by the nervous and delicate wood-block illustrations. Several are full page. They deal in landscape ideas—vortices of solar energy and softer views of streams and border shrubbery. The wood-block illustrations have an expressionizing nostalgia to them that is widespread in semi-abstractness, a nostalgia that is perhaps at odds with the detachment of the cloth octagons—except, perhaps, for the latter's depressed, washed-out range of color.

Tuttle's experience with the Air Force exteriorized a break with the past and the mature person suddenly emerges from this episode. Tuttle describes a training that lasted six weeks. Three were spent as an underclassman, three as an upperclassman. The latter's duties included assisting in the "indoctrination" of the underclassmen. Training was completed by undergoing a machine-scored examination, the answers to which, in Tuttle's view, were "perfect median responses."

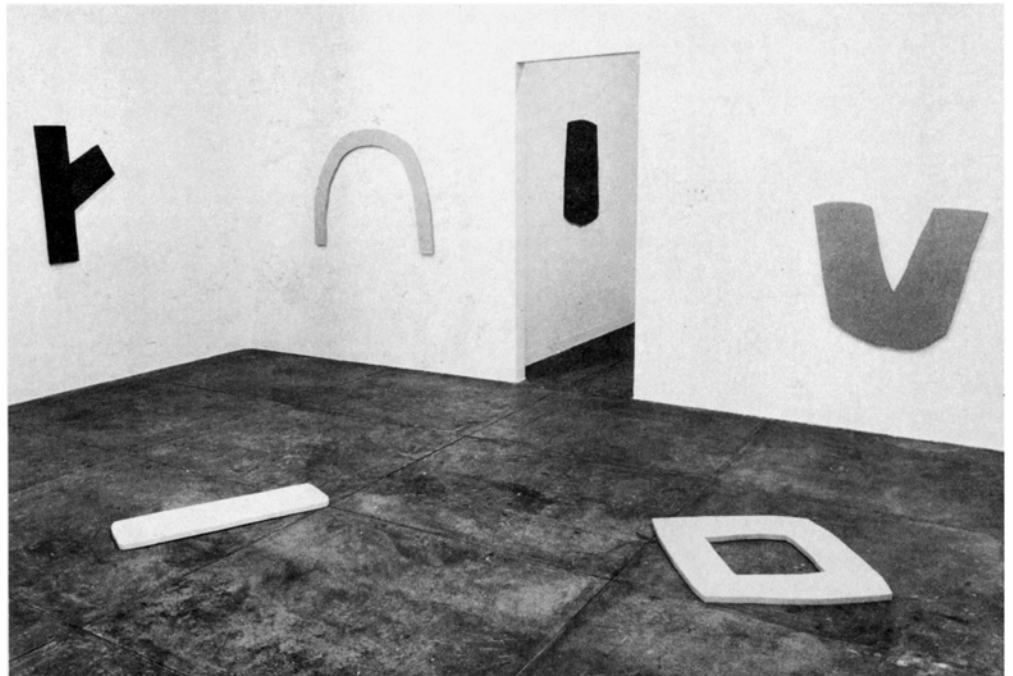
After "indoctrination" it was unimaginable to score below 80 although a person of military aptitude might score as high as 83. "I blew the machine. I did it on purpose. I got 2. I was everything for the authorities. Catatonic. They said I never could enter military or civilian employment for the rest of my life." At the end of six weeks of training Tuttle was honorably discharged. He was 22. He returned to New York and found modest employment as an assistant at the Betty Parsons Gallery, where he earned enough on which to subsist and still provide sufficient time to work on his painting.

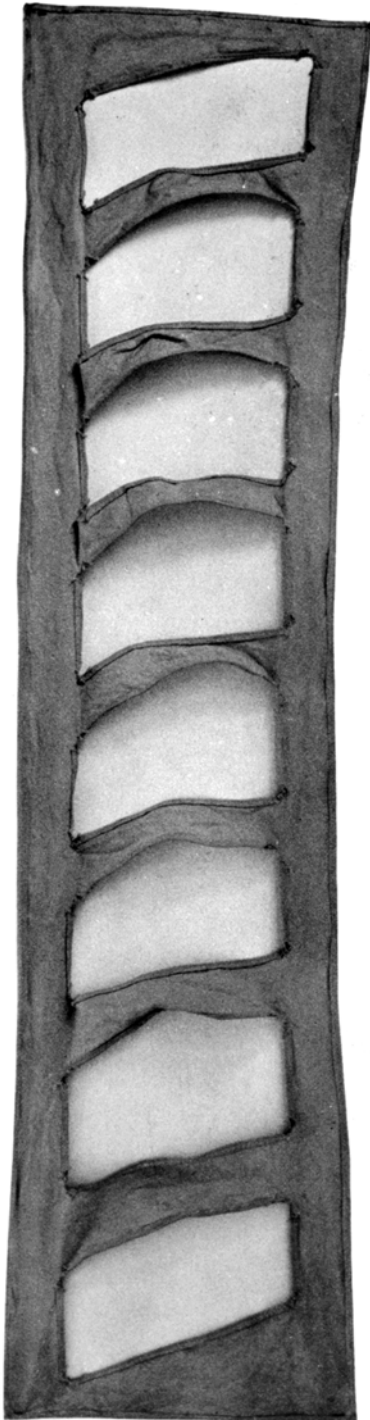
Between 1963 and 1965 Tuttle began to construct things, "often little things, such as 3-inch paper cubes that fit neatly into the palm of your



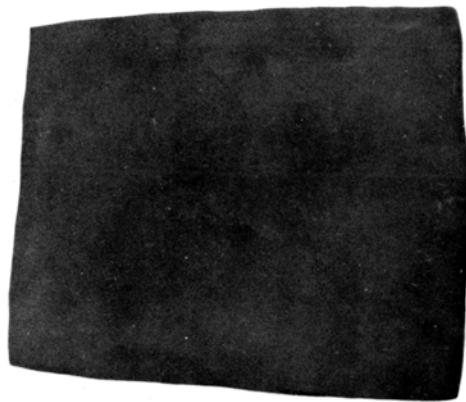
Richard Tuttle, *The Elephant*, 12½ x 11¾", 1963. Betty Parsons Gallery.

Richard Tuttle, Installation view, Betty Parsons Gallery, September, 1965. On wall, l. to r.: *Talk, Hill, Torso and Water*. On floor: *Yellow, Fire*.

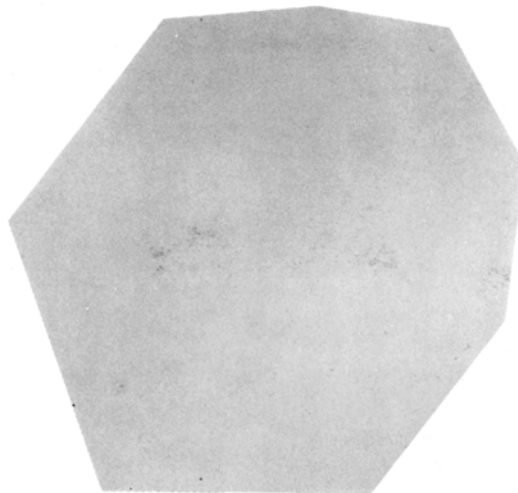




Richard Tuttle, *Ladder Piece*, ca. 6' h., 1966-7.



Richard Tuttle, *Away*, oil on board, 28 x 36½", 1965. Betty Parsons Gallery.



Richard Tuttle, *White Octagon*, paper, 1969. Betty Parsons Gallery.

pictorializing sculptural option—in part the result of Pop, in part the result of Minimalism—corresponds to the ideogrammatic reliefs of Tuttle. Of course there had been antecedents. One of the reasons that Arp is once more so highly esteemed is that his painted wooden reliefs, particularly those made through the 1920s, articulate a similar attitude.<sup>3</sup> The substantive alignment of Tuttle's reliefs of 1965 with the critical sculptural issues of the early 1960s are striking and important. But, in themselves, I find the reliefs facile and disappointing. History, however, inaugurates a kind of *force majeure* and after the experience of the cloth octagons, and now the paper ones, the ideogrammatic reliefs, wall hung, unitary, displaceable at the possessor's discretion, theoretically appear more interesting. Hindsight has added much, particularly with regard to the issues which are still being argued in the cloth and paper pieces. As Tuttle told me, "I started out making thick wood pieces and they got thinner and thinner. They turned into cloth. And now I am doing paper."

I recently visited the artist in his midtown West Side studio, an anonymous neighborhood for New York, nowhere. The studio occupies the top floor of a tenement. It is painted a dingy white and is largely empty except for essentials, a table, a chair. Books and food are stored in the same cupboard.

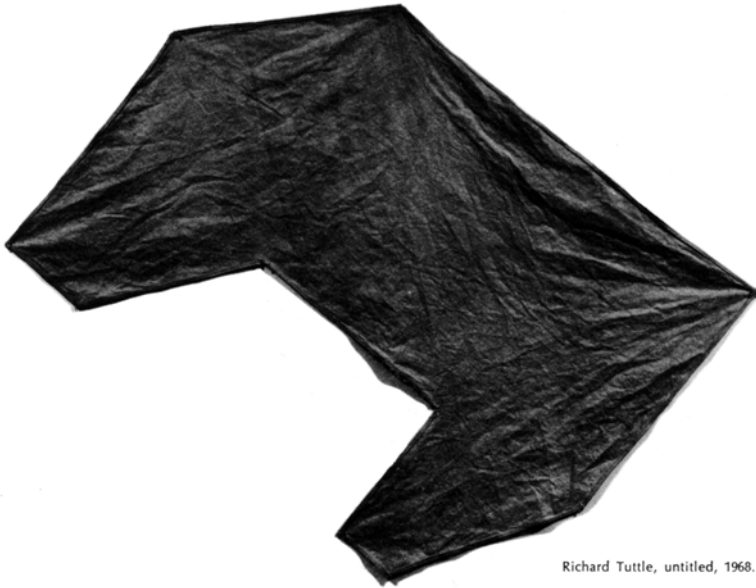
The cloth and the (newer) paper octagons may be affixed limply to the wall, like garments, and they share formal concerns with the work of Sonnier and Robert Morris. They have less in common with Robert Rymans, with whose work one might be tempted at first to compare them. Rymans' papers emphasize surface; their white brushed surfaces reiterate the nature of the wall and the two-dimensionality of the whole undertaking. In the newer Rymans the urge toward seriality has been replaced by other methods which still conform to emphasizing the nature of the wall-like surface, such as brushing around the square module so that the square shape is negatively expressed by the removal of the square template. There may be some affiliation, however, in the use of masking tape. These support the recent Rymans and they are the necessary, though hidden, support of Tuttle's paper octagons.

The octagons had been cut one after the other. Tuttle considered each new one an improvement over the last. He remembered the sequence. The earlier ones tended to have a more pronounced symmetry and axiality, a familiarity. One could easily suppose which part of the octagon was the bottom. It tended to have longer sides. It was heavier. The later octagons were more eccentric, employing greater numbers of variegated lengths to the sides and more unanticipated interior angles.

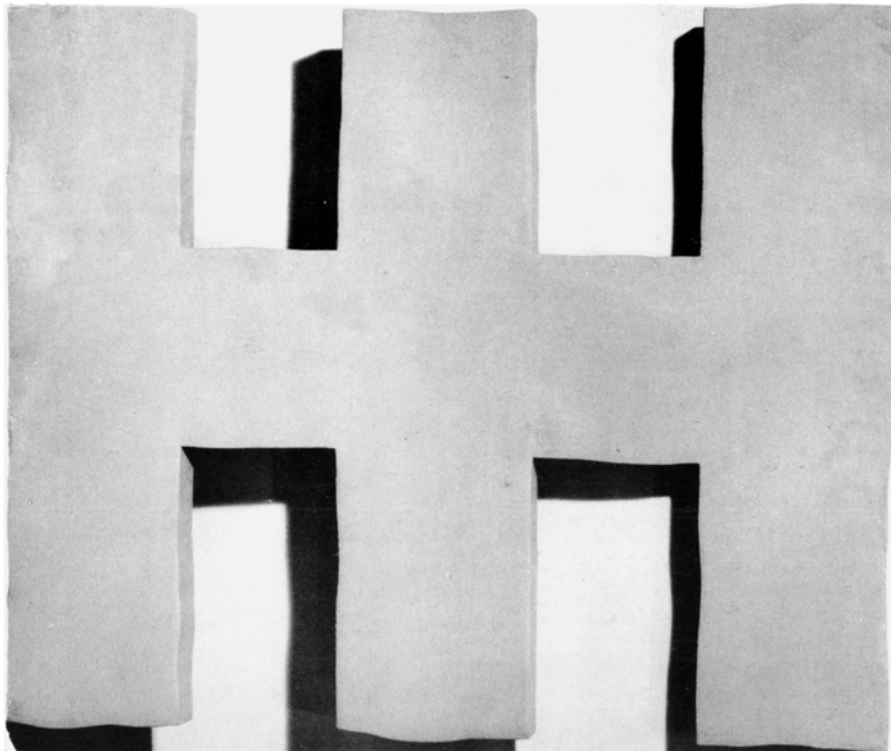
"The later ones are better," said Tuttle.

"I don't know if I agree with you, although I admit that they are less familiar."

"I would like to make all six octagons the same."



Richard Tuttle, untitled, 1968.



Richard Tuttle, *House*, 26½ x 33". Betty Parsons Gallery.

But I'll never do that."

On the mantelpiece of a closed fireplace of what is now the kitchen lay a thin piece of wood through which many nails had carefully been driven, their exposed points spelling TUTTLE.

"Are you going to perforate your signature?"

"I was thinking about it."

"Do you sign the pieces?"

"Signing is equal to destroying the piece. It is no longer a piece of paper. It violates its purity. Here, I'll show you." Tuttle wrote his name with a felt-tip pen large across the face of one of the paper octagons.

"Purity" seems, in large measure, to be a function of the viewer rather than of the work: "They (the papers) set the limits of a person's appreciation. They are disposable and not disposable. Even Rembrandts are disposable. It all depends on the limits of a person's appreciation."

In the end, even the purity of the white paper is questionable. "I have a hatred for this white thing. I can't stand the kind of purity that white implies in our environment. But the kind of purity that comes out of the complete electrical functioning of the whole human being—that's the kind of purity I aspire to. To be free of senses and the intellect. I would really like to be ignorant." The Zen overtones in these sentiments are not incidental. After the success of his cloth exhibition, Tuttle went to Japan for a year, visiting the villages rather than the major cities. He plans to return this year; the two books on his mantelpiece were a Japanese-English dictionary and a Japanese grammar. He does not encourage, however, a description of his own artistic ambitions in terms of his involvement in Oriental attitudes. "Any conceptions that Americans can have about Oriental ideas are really still about their own ideas . . ."

I had copied some inscriptions that Tuttle had made on working drawings for the cloth octagons. One read, "This is a working drawing of a more or less isometric house which made an empty house . . . only seven sides." Another read, "This is a drawing which ended the drawing of the work; the idea came out later in an eight side dull red piece."

"That was a joke," said Tuttle. "They were drawn after the pieces were made. The drawings showed me what I didn't want to know." ■

1. Emily Wasserman, "Richard Tuttle," *Artforum*, March 1968, pp. 56-7. Several important catalogs credit me with this perspicacious review. The catalogs *Live In Your Head, When Attitudes Become Form*, Kunsthalle, Bern, March-April 1969, and *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials*, Whitney Museum, 1969, are in error in this respect.

2. Tuttle acknowledges his debt to Arp although he notes that he became aware of Arp only after the reliefs had been made. This cannot deny the derivation, however, since Arp's attitudes have long been subsumed into wide artistic consciousness. Tuttle, therefore, could have assimilated Arp's thinking from thousands of sources, not one of them being Arp himself. Moreover, the Arps at the Museum of Modern Art were known to Tuttle even if he had not thought about them especially.

There is still another art of the early 1960s to which Tuttle's bears striking resemblance—although in this case it is highly probable that Tuttle was unaware of it. I refer to the singularly important and neglected *Concetti Spaziale* of Lucio Fontana, particularly those reliefs whose surface is but little scored, or lacerated. Fontana was shown at the Martha Jackson Gallery in 1961 although he had been widely exhibited in Europe, with a long career played out in Italy, although he had been born in Argentina.