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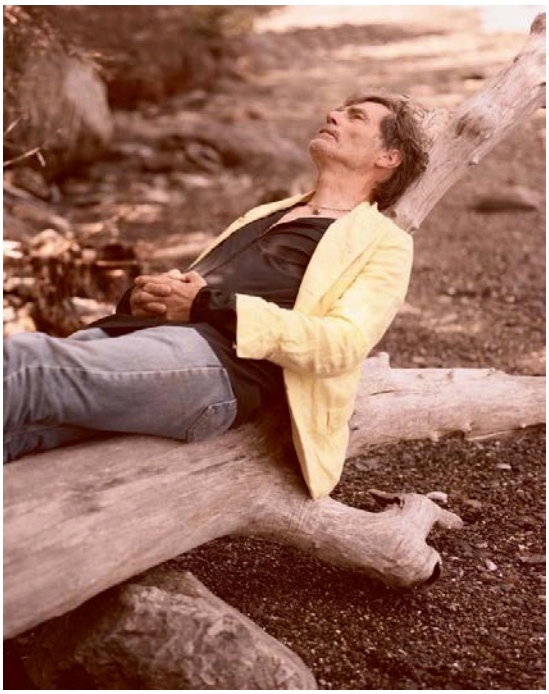
IN THE STUDIO: RICHARD TUTTLE

By Ross Simonini | September 27, 2014



Portrait by Boru O’Brien O’Connell

Last spring, I spent a long, edifying Friday with Richard Tuttle in New York. In the afternoon we dined at a fine Italian restaurant in Midtown and surveyed a potential space for one of Tuttle’s future exhibitions, talking all the while. In the evening, I accompanied him on his weekly ritual at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which included eating pastries, drinking espresso, studying the map of exhibits and proceeding on a long, rambling tour through the galleries, guided by one of the great eccentric personalities of contemporary art.

Tuttle began showing his work in the mid-’60s, at the age of 24, and quickly became a significant contributor in an art scene that included artists as diverse as Robert Smithson and Agnes Martin. While some of Tuttle’s early, spare work builds upon the precedent of Minimalism, his art for the last 50 years has maintained its own curious independence: defiant of trends in contemporary culture, poetic in times dominated by austere conceptual art.

Tuttle’s quiet abstractions take the form of painting, assemblage, sculpture and drawing, often simultaneously, as if such discrete categories never occurred to him. The philosophical category of importance to Tuttle is the object. The objects he constructs have employed a host of common materials—lengths of rope and string, strips of tape, balloons, pieces of plywood, lightbulbs. One material, fabric, has been essential to his practice since his earliest exhibitions at Betty Parsons Gallery in New York, where he showed works such as crumpled, irregular octagons of dyed cloth. His show earlier this year at New York’s Pace Gallery, “Looking for the Map,” displayed an ornamental approach to fabric, which is also seen in his sartorial sensibility (at our meeting, he wore a psychedelic gold tie and a purple handkerchief tucked into his shirt pocket). The works in the Pace show served as a series of studies for a very large-scale installation that opens this month in London at Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall, filling the space with a rainbow of textiles, some made by Tuttle, some culled from international collections. The installation is accompanied by a major, five-decade retrospective of Tuttle’s work, held just a couple miles across town, at the Whitechapel Gallery. The two showings comprise one exhibition, titled “I Don’t Know or The Weave of Textile Language.”

In our conversation, Tuttle’s discussion of his work and his intentions for the dual-venue show involved frequent tangents, asides, references and exegesis. Listening to him speak can feel vertiginous and labyrinthine in a way that complements his work. Questions are rarely answered. Topics are introduced and dropped without explanation. The following is an edited version of our interview that attempts to retain the tumbling, digressive spirit of Tuttle’s speech.

ROSS SIMONINI The last time we met, you told me that you’d been trying to “hold strong to the object.” What does that mean?

RICHARD TUTTLE The object is important for looking. The eye, seeing the totality, is physical and spiritual—a lifelong development. I have a collection of glass objects. The eye is invited to go through, if it wants, or to stop. These are superb training devices. Objects can be made with embodied hands or disembodied hands. I like making things with disembodied hands.

SIMONINI What are those?

TUTTLE Our culture is anti-hand; it thinks it’s better to work with your head. Everybody aspires to go to college, so they don’t have to work with their hands, yet hands are a source of intelligence. You divorce yourself from a part of your intelligence without them. To work with disembodied hands is perfect; you have all the intelligence, but don’t submit to the sentimentality that says handmade is more valuable. The “maker’s movement” is not sentimental.

As a little kid, I saw my grandfather draw from across the room. I saw harmony between eye/brain, hand and heart/spirit; I was astonished. People say there are just as many, if not more, neurons in the heart as in the brain; people talk about neurons in the intestines. Where does intelligence come from? I have not heard anyone talking about the hand having neurons.

SIMONINI Your recent Pace show was a series of studies for the upcoming Tate installation.

TUTTLE That show made me happy and excited about the future. [Pace founder] Arne Glimcher sent me an e-mail, saying that many people came into the show as grumpy New Yorkers and left happy. The show could turn you around.

Purple Octagonal, 1967, dyed canvas and thread, 54 7/8 by 55 1/2 inches. Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. Courtesy Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London, and Pace Gallery, New York.

SIMONINI How so?

TUTTLE If you made a list of great novels, symphonies and architecture, you could see the beauty of humanity, which is one of the hardest things to see right now. We’re so critical, so competitive. We blame ourselves for ruining the Earth. A theme in the Pace show was the beauty of people. Jacob Boehme, an early-Renaissance German mystic, wrote The Signature of All Things. It’s nice to pass that book on; it’s always been a kind of secret, generation after generation. His chief idea is that mystical presence exists as a signature. Every time you see something, part of what you see is the signature, which is the beauty of man. I’m taking time with this, because the last time we spoke, we discussed Plato.

SIMONINI I read the Phaedrus dialogue on your recommendation.

TUTTLE Isn’t it amazing? I’m reading the Apology. I thought recently, “The reason our ancestors began standing on their hind legs was to talk, to look in each other’s faces.” It wasn’t to pick apples. It was to be face to face, because dialogue is the glue of the social matrix. I’m also reading Sophocles. You have to read the original Greek. It’s not hard. I just do two lines a day.

SIMONINI Very slow reading.

TUTTLE That is the difference from school. If I had studied the works there, with exams, etc., they would have given me too much. I give myself one hour a day, so I’m always hungry. I can’t wait for the next 24 hours to pass.

SIMONINI How do these works connect to the London show?

TUTTLE Figuring out skin and structure, skin and bones. The key of the Turbine Hall project is scale. A seed wants to grow; it has growth potential. Sometimes I start a drawing on a piece of paper and can hardly keep it on the page.

SIMONINI Largeness isn’t something I’d associate you with. Your work is generally focused and contained, and your drawings usually deal with the center of the support.

TUTTLE One can distinguish between scale and size. Usually, we are happy with the issue of size—if it’s small, it’s small; if it’s big, it’s big. But scale is a question of the individual. Each person, everyone ever born, has a unique scale. They have it like a unique fingerprint. You can decide to find your scale. The day you find it is a day you remember. It changes your life. Your parents may determine your size, but you determine your scale. Your creative dimension allows you to create yourself in a more significant way than how you are created by your parents. Life offers each of us that possibility. It’s sad how few take it up.

SIMONINI Are you talking about proportion?

TUTTLE Human experience is a constant struggle between the real and the unreal. Every moment you are faced with trying to work out an acceptable relationship between the two. Art is almost by definition a working out of real and unreal; that is its value. The world is a place where size issues need to be worked out, and this involves all kinds of quantitative issues, which can be expressed emotionally or physically, in relationships with other people, etc. But the relations between the real and the unreal are negotiated internally, where issues of scale come in. You don’t want to waste your time looking at an artist who doesn’t know their scale. The buzz around the Turbine Hall show is because the world knows me as making artwork of small size.

In 23, 1998, acrylic, canvas and wood, 13¼ by 12½ by 2 inches. Courtesy Stuart Shave/Modern Art and Pace Gallery. Photo Joerg Lohse.

SIMONINI Certainly.

TUTTLE The reason I can do small size is because my scale can be small. Scale contains the issue of right and wrong, the moral and the ethical. I don’t care if you kill your mother, if your ethics are right. Everyone wants their point of view to prevail, but it’s so much better to have many points of view.

SIMONINI Can you distinguish between the real and the unreal?

TUTTLE Our brains are real. Mythology feeds the brain. Our souls are not real; truth feeds soul. We need mythology the way dogs need to sniff. Their brains don’t work without sniffing. Newspapers feed us mythology.

SIMONINI Is it sort of like the difference between sensory and extrasensory?

TUTTLE Western culture defines reality as concrete. Asian culture defines reality as the absence of the concrete, as absolute nothingness. Western culture drives Asian people out of their minds, and Asian culture drives Western people out of theirs. Maybe I can contribute the next, best definition of concrete. Eastern tradition has major achievements; Western does, too. So it’s not about choosing one over the other. We have to figure out how to absorb and move on. When I speak about the real and the not real, the real is a sort of Western side. It’s a stupid, thumbnail way of speaking.

SIMONINI Is art real or unreal?

TUTTLE Art is unreal; color is real. That’s why painting is so fascinating. Color is real when you paint, but paint is not real. Paint is one of the great inventions. It can transport you from this world to the next. It’s a major thing.

SIMONINI How did the Turbine Hall show come about?

TUTTLE Chris Dercon became director of Tate Modern [in 2011]. I met Chris when he was 18. He was an intern at a gallery in the attic of an old building in Ghent.

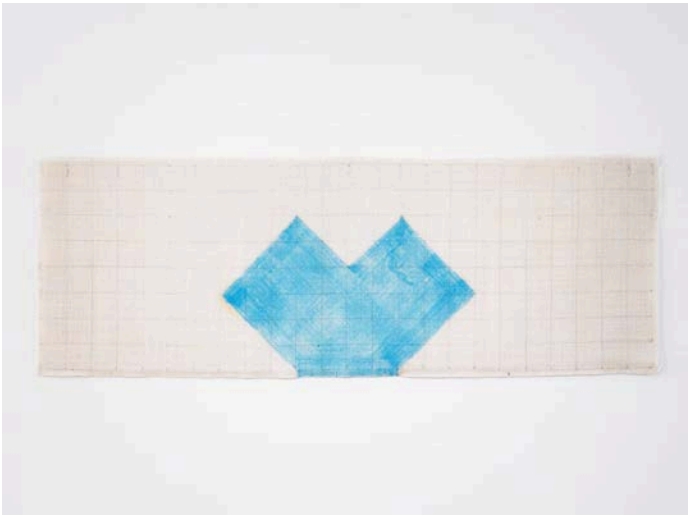
SIMONINI What work were you showing then?

TUTTLE Notebook drawings. Those just showed at the Fleming Museum at the University of Vermont in Burlington [in an exhibition of the Dorothy and Herbert Vogel collection]. The notebook drawings were an attempt to solve the problem of the artist in democracy. Marginalized, because the artist cannot subordinate personality to demos—an artist can’t really be a member. The drawings came to be about how many could be made. There were probably 7,000. I threw most of them out. When I was moving, I took some of them to the garbage. Herb Vogel came to visit. I said to him, “The garbage truck’s coming in five minutes. If you want those drawings, you can have them.” So he, being a collector, went down and got them.

SIMONINI Do you often throw out work?

TUTTLE If it’s a creative act, you can. But if it’s out of ego or intellect, you suffer a lot.

SIMONINI How does this relate to the Turbine Hall show?



Perceived Obstacle No. 72 (Oil Painting #1), 1991, oil and graphite on unstretched canvas, 13¾ by 38½ inches. Courtesy Stuart Shave/Modern Art and Pace Gallery. Photo Kerry Ryan McFate.

TUTTLE The realized piece will be a model of itself and itself as a model; I don’t want just a blowup of a model. I’m working with a theater production manager on it. The problem is, I don’t know the stuff I need to know. What I most don’t know is how the skin is attached to the bones. As you saw in the Pace show, ambiguity between color and structure was stated quite clearly and exercised as ambiguity—that’s really hard to do. I’m thinking of the Steve Jobs biography I just read. He wound up in Silicon Valley after he went to Reed College. While at Reed, he sat in on a few calligraphy classes with Lloyd Reynolds—as did so many. That sense of design that Lloyd gave him led him into . . . I mean, we’re sitting across the street from one of the most important Apple stores. Its design comes from those simple calligraphy classes at Reed. I know other people like that—their ability to absorb is phenomenal.

SIMONINI Will you make most of the work for the Tate project beforehand?

TUTTLE We’ve already been working two and a half years. Chris Dercon was director of the Boymans van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam during the time I made a show there. His strength is visionary, and I understand that my job for the Tate exhibition is (1) to understand his vision, (2) to realize it and (3) to make a Richard Tuttle show—a pretty tall order.

SIMONINI Do you feel like you’ve synthesized all of those?

TUTTLE Not yet. My dream is to be myself in public. The only way I could survive growing up was to construct a persona; it had nothing to do with me. I was a popular kid, functioned in the world, but I lived in another place.

SIMONINI Your mind was separate.

TUTTLE Yes. No one to talk to. When I came to New York I met Betty Parsons. Henri Bergson was important for her; she could say a picture is an accounting of the visible world, but it’s also an accounting of the invisible world. She knew the invisible world, and I lived in the invisible world.

Recently, I had a high school reunion. I loved all those people, and they loved me. They wanted me to come. In the end, I didn’t go. My friend called the next day. I said, “I have fought so hard to live in the world as I need to. I am never going back.”

SIMONINI I didn’t go to my reunion either.

TUTTLE My college reunion hooked me into doing a yearbook, because I had done the one for the class. I love books. I got dragged in, so I went, and everyone wanted to talk about playing Frisbee 50 years ago. These are smart leaders of America. We have inner lives; inner lives are destroyed, replaced by outer lives. My work is food for the inner life—I want someone to make something for my inner life.

The first day of kindergarten, my drawing was rejected by the teacher. Now I’ve studied a bit of child development, and I see that my drawing was at genius level, which the teacher wasn’t able to grasp. Not only did I not receive praise for a drawing that was important to me, but I was marginalized, punished. I have never trusted a teacher the rest of my life. That’s good. One of my lines is, “If Aristotle can’t be your teacher, you have to teach yourself.” When I speak at art schools, I say, “I’m not here to teach how to be an artist but to say, as best I can, what it’s like to be an artist.” They are eager to hear.