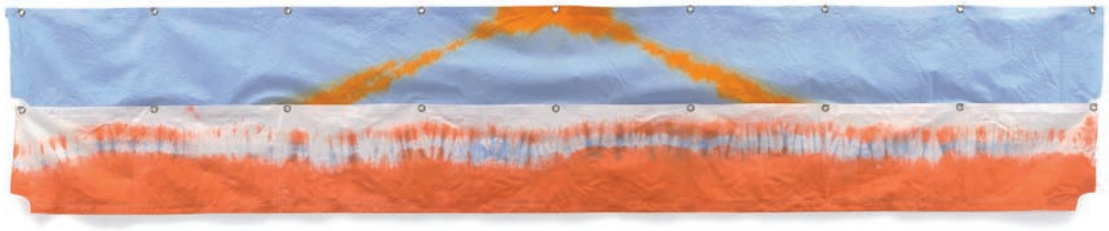
“Portfolio: Richard Tuttle,” *Artforum*, October 2014, pp. 212–223

This page: **Richard Tuttle, *Walking on Air, C10*, 2009,** cotton, Rit dyes, grommets, thread, 1' 11" × 10' 3".

Opposite page: **Dyed Indian bag, Korean, designed for Chinese market, early twenty-first century,** cloth. From the collection of Richard Tuttle.



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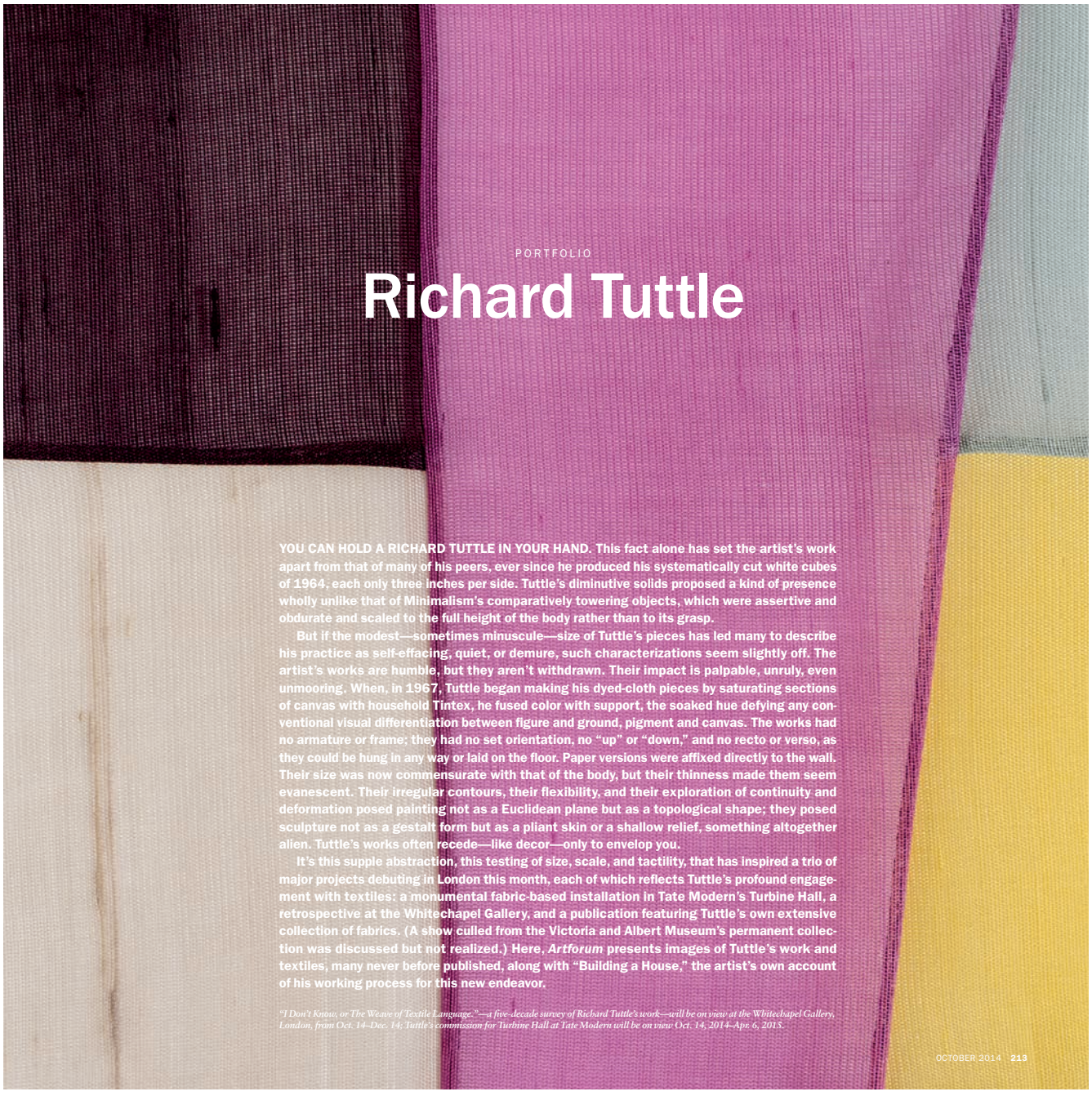

PORTFOLIO

Richard Tuttle

YOU CAN HOLD A RICHARD TUTTLE IN YOUR HAND. This fact alone has set the artist's work apart from that of many of his peers, ever since he produced his systematically cut white cubes of 1964, each only three inches per side. Tuttle's diminutive solids proposed a kind of presence wholly unlike that of Minimalism's comparatively towering objects, which were assertive and obdurate and scaled to the full height of the body rather than to its grasp.

But if the modest—sometimes minuscule—size of Tuttle's pieces has led many to describe his practice as self-effacing, quiet, or demure, such characterizations seem slightly off. The artist's works are humble, but they aren't withdrawn. Their impact is palpable, unruly, even unmooring. When, in 1967, Tuttle began making his dyed-cloth pieces by saturating sections of canvas with household Tintex, he fused color with support, the soaked hue defying any conventional visual differentiation between figure and ground, pigment and canvas. The works had no armature or frame; they had no set orientation, no "up" or "down," and no recto or verso, as they could be hung in any way or laid on the floor. Paper versions were affixed directly to the wall. Their size was now commensurate with that of the body, but their thinness made them seem evanescent. Their irregular contours, their flexibility, and their exploration of continuity and deformation posed painting not as a Euclidean plane but as a topological shape; they posed sculpture not as a gestalt form but as a pliant skin or a shallow relief, something altogether alien. Tuttle's works often recede—like decor—only to envelop you.

It's this supple abstraction, this testing of size, scale, and tactility, that has inspired a trio of major projects debuting in London this month, each of which reflects Tuttle's profound engagement with textiles: a monumental fabric-based installation in Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, a retrospective at the Whitechapel Gallery, and a publication featuring Tuttle's own extensive collection of fabrics. (A show culled from the Victoria and Albert Museum's permanent collection was discussed but not realized.) Here, *Artforum* presents images of Tuttle's work and textiles, many never before published, along with "Building a House," the artist's own account of his working process for this new endeavor.

"I Don't Know, or The Weave of Textile Language."—a five-decade survey of Richard Tuttle's work—will be on view at the Whitechapel Gallery, London, from Oct. 14–Dec. 14; Tuttle's commission for Turbine Hall at Tate Modern will be on view Oct. 14, 2014–Apr. 6, 2015.

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This page: **Richard Tuttle, *In 14*, 1999**, acrylic, canvas, wood, 8¾ × 3¼ × 1⅜".

Opposite page: **Wedding dress, French or Italian, nineteenth century,** embroidered net. From the collection of Richard Tuttle.

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BUILDING A HOUSE

BASEMENT

If anyone knows Chris Dercon (as I’m sure many do), they know he is feisty, visionary, and hardworking, someone who can get things done, someone who works at the global scale. Among his many curatorial and directorial posts was the directorship of the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam. While there, he witnessed an exhibition, “Red Oxide,” that I made with the late, great curator Alma Ruempol at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen. Alma called on me, a collector of pots, to enliven her collection of humble period pots, which no one would look at. When Chris became director of Tate Modern, he said he would like to do a similar show on a grand scale, focusing this time on textiles, in three London venues: the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Whitechapel Gallery, and Tate’s Turbine Hall. Because my work is known for its small size, and the Turbine Hall for its large size, some saw a fit.

Chris and I met in Ghent, Belgium, during the early 1970s. I was so moved that he liked the Rotterdam show (very ahead of its time) that I accepted his proposal, which I quickly saw was not a proposal but a vision. I saw first to define it, second to realize it, and third to make a Richard Tuttle show. Achim Borchardt-Hume was already planning my exhibition at the Whitechapel. We began negotiations with the Victoria and Albert (whose textile department is the gold standard). Since each London institution defines itself in opposition to another and they had never worked together, we had to build from the foundation up.

A three-part structure, using the V&A as a resource to define the textile, the Whitechapel to show its history through my work, and the Turbine Hall to make something new of it, appeared obvious for the show. Always involved with books, I ambitiously suggested making the publication a fourth exhibition. We found an excellent designer in Mark Thomson, whose catalogues have dynamic energy. Achim was made head of exhibitions at Tate Modern. Magnus af Petersens came from the Moderna Museet, Stockholm, to be chief curator at the Whitechapel. Behind the scenes was the constant support of Sir Nicholas Serota, director of the Tate.

Almost from the start, I knew what I wanted to do for Turbine Hall. At its core, it has never changed, although all else has.

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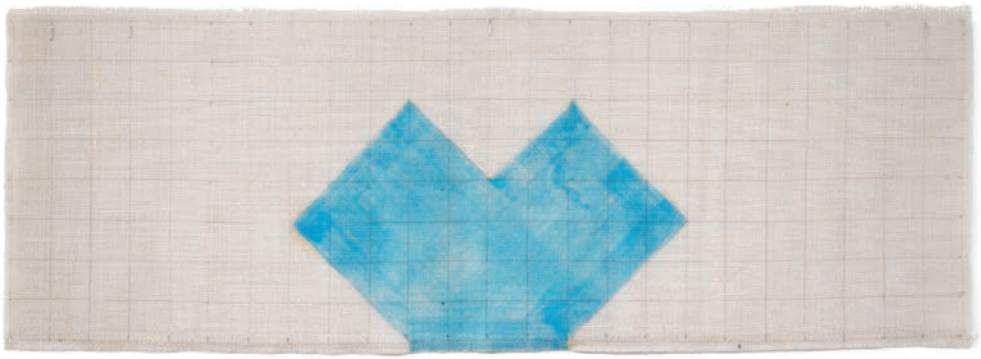
This page: **Richard Tuttle, *Perceived Obstacle No. 72 (Oil Painting #1)*, 1991**, oil and graphite on canvas, 13¾ × 38½".

Opposite page: **Sari from Garden Silk Mills, Surat, India, early twenty-first century**, silk. From the collection of Richard Tuttle.



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FIRST FLOOR

Magnus came to LA to visit for four days while I was at the Getty Research Institute as the artist in residence. He and I made a checklist of some twenty-two works; curiously, we made a selected list of my work in general at the same time. The Whitechapel checklist, like the idea for the Turbine Hall project, never strayed. We are using it in itself (no two textiles are used the same way or for the same purpose) and as a structure for an exhibition. This firm checklist helps those unfamiliar with my work. The thematic use of textile can be studied and pondered. I am thrilled to have my work shown in an institution I have long loved for its commitments, history, service, inspiration, and excellence. My experience, though short, reflects the original charter, written more than one hundred years ago.

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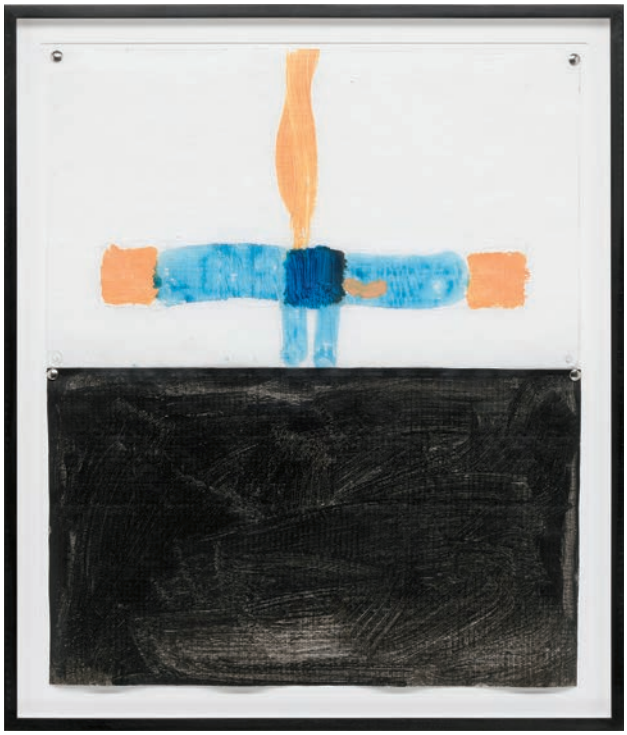
This page: **Richard Tuttle, *Space-Is-Concrete (6)*, 2005,** gesso, acrylic, and graphite on spun plastic, 24 × 20".

Opposite page: **Dutch fabric for African market, mid-twentieth century,** cotton. From the collection of Richard Tuttle.



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SECOND FLOOR

No models are possible. My work shall be its own model; it is not a blowup. Over the years of planning, only when the work is willing to tell me do I know and am I able to communicate to others. I have made “models,” but only for some aspect, or to show something I don’t want. Everyone has been extremely patient; like me, they are desperate, but we have to wait. In fact, the piece has grown. When it took a giant leap in size, enough to make Turbine Hall look small, I relaxed, knowing this really wants to exist.

We found an excellent project manager, Jim Leaver, who has a background in theater. He is used to listening to creative types who are not very good at articulating. He sees his job as realizing the ideas of others and does his best to bring together skilled craftspeople, from seamstresses to riggers, as well as the latest imaging systems, and fit everything into a schedule and budget. When I say to him, “Art is the first thing lost in a big project like this, and it is my job to prevent that,” he acts like he knows what I mean. When I say, “This is a game where I have all the chips and you are supposed to get half away from me,” he seems to know what I mean. When I say, “You are supposed to attach the fabric, and I to tell you how,” he stops asking.

Like all big institutions, the Tate must follow laws meant to guide and protect the public. We must fireproof. We must fumigate. All these can change the fabric as designed—harden it, densify it. We have found solutions. We are also mindful that the materials we use must be returned to circulation when we finish, and how we do that can save money. I am hoping the fabrics are so beautiful that they can be reused in fashionable clothes.

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This page: **Richard Tuttle, *Purple Octagonal*, 1967**, dyed canvas, thread, 54⅛ × 55½".

Opposite page: **Dust sheet, early twenty-first century**, felt. From the collection of Richard Tuttle.

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THE ROOF

We are looking forward to beginning to install on September 2. We have already begun to build and have seen a major section brought into the space—it looks perfect! Lighting is a major factor, not only because the work will be viewed during the dark months but because it can offer assistance. Because every molecule is operative, the many windows into Turbine Hall are considered viewing stations. But I think my favorite view will be from the floor, looking up. An ambition is to say something about perception in general, through perception of color in particular. I don’t know how to do this or how it will happen.

When I made my cloth octagonals in 1967, I saw there was a moment when color and light became one through the textile. Without getting into the intricacies of how the simple under-over, over-under structure of the textile functions in a conceal-and-reveal universe, the fact that you can spend an afternoon choosing a shirt and forget all about it when you put it on tells us that the textile may be more important than we think.

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This page: **Richard Tuttle, *Section VII, Extension 0*, 2007**, wood, acrylic paint, fabric, cardboard, aluminum wire, screws, 7 ¼ × 3½ × 4¾".

Opposite page: **Bag, Nazca culture, Peru, sixth century**, natural dyes, cotton. From the collection of Richard Tuttle.

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CHIMNEY

I am a textile collector. Certain people picked up on the textile as significant in the new world and new values proposed by the 1960s. My great dealer friend Mary Hunt Kahlenberg focused on the products of master weavers. These are people born into every race, tribe, gender, and culture. Until I met Mary, I collected mostly Islamic; afterward, pre-Columbian, African, her favorite—Indonesian—and of course Far Eastern and Indian, too.

In trying to define the textile by the textile, we had to consider machine-made textiles and man-made fibers, somewhat outside the canon, both dominated by the male. (I was surprised that collectors of traditional textiles are mostly men, and ones who love women.) No one knows how to collect machine-made textiles. I have made books in which I collect the scraps given away for free. Textiles are now mostly made in the East; a quick walk through Walmart shows how the market connects to regional quality and character. Research meant being in contact with the big players, whether collectors, scholars, dealers, or curators in the field.

My favorite textile in my collection is a fragment from the Chavin culture in Peru. This culture is said to have domesticated cotton and to be the inventor of a writing system that lasted twenty-five hundred years, until the Aztecs. My piece is glyphs painted on cloth; you cannot imagine where the power comes from.

Neither the Whitechapel nor Turbine Hall show will change during its exhibition period. The careful observer may notice that my recent work uses fabric as paint. This ensures that the natural force of gravity will not be operative aesthetically but will, of course, occur physically.

Living with a poet is inspiring.

A new direction in my collecting is late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century American house-made fabrics, created by people who grew, prepared, spun, and wove their linen—an unthinkable degree of labor, yet the result can be art. Some of the textiles still have the names of makers embroidered on them. They stretch my eye, my mind, and exercise my touch.

Admittedly, I am what less ambitious artists call pretentious. I think Jan van Eyck found the point where the verbal and visual touch. I think Ad Reinhardt is the most important Abstract Expressionist. You can do something in art, and the deepest world shows itself through art; the artist only serves, if that. People say my work has a great range in scale, but the scale is always the same, whether big or small—that is amazing, because it says something about the nature of human creativity. Color I choose to see as open and infinite, so each body of work using color has its own definition of it.

Recent work made from pulp and mesh allows form to come from two things pulled apart, rather than pushed together—synthesis. This results from a critique of deductive reasoning, so fundamental in Western culture as to have become invisible. What tool do we have to examine ourselves but art?

Each of us is constructed in a special way, so we are good at certain things, not others. We tend to fit in, toe the line, or be aberrant. I have always had a very peculiar relation to word and image—in some ways it makes me an avatar, in others, an ignoramus. Perhaps that’s why my statements can have an enigmatic quality. □

RICHARD TUTTLE IS AN ARTIST BASED IN NEW YORK AND NEW MEXICO.