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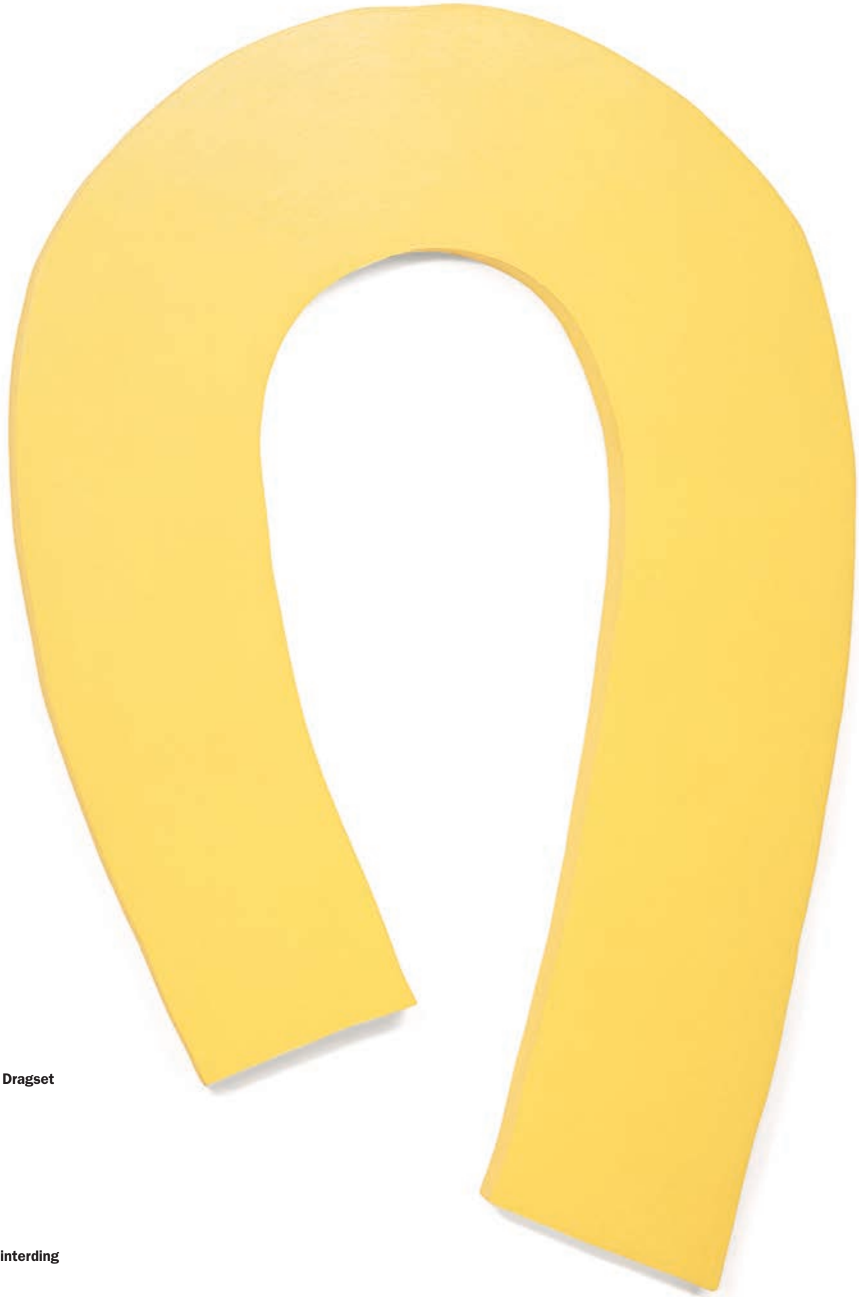

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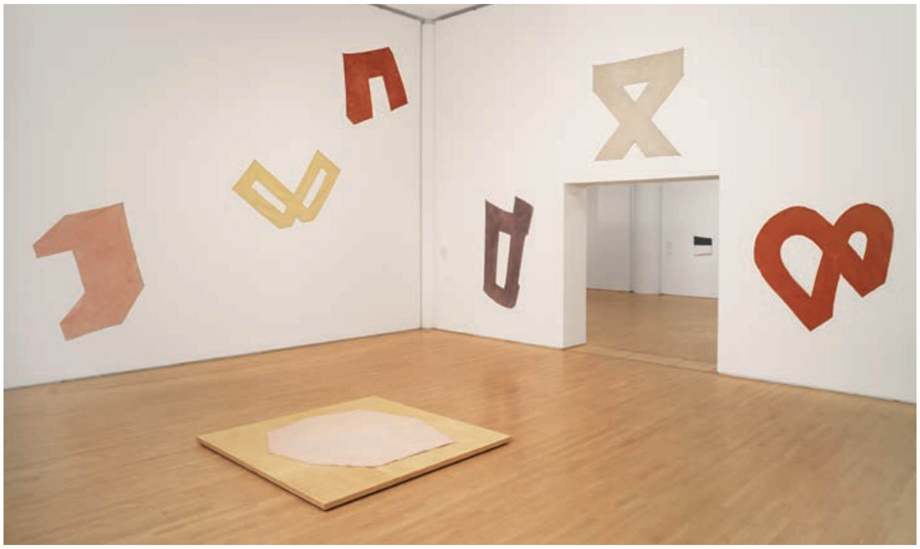
RICHARD TUTTLE

SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM
OF MODERN ART

ANNE M. WAGNER



Opposite page: **Richard Tuttle, *Yellow Dancer*, 1965,** acrylic on plywood, 43 x 29 x 1⅜". This page: **View of “The Art of Richard Tuttle,” San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2005.**

There are several artists of the 1960s generation whose portraits have become the icons of an era: Think of Robert Smithson standing alone at the end of his jetty, or Eva Hesse clowning in her studio, or a masked and booted Richard Serra wielding that ladleful of lead. Now try to summon a comparable image of Richard Tuttle. Chances are you will fail.

It may well be that the current Tuttle retrospective—a major exhibition organized by Madeleine Grynsztejn of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and scheduled to travel to New York, Des Moines, Dallas, Chicago, and Los Angeles—will change things. If so, the newly anointed icon will look quite different from its prototypes, and display an oddly elusive saint. Don’t ask *him* to mug for the camera. He’s too involved in his tasks to strike the required pose.

But of course he is posing even so. In most photos, Tuttle turns his back to the observer and does something invisible on or to the wall. In others, he kneels above a length of material (paper or fabric, mostly) stretched out on the floor. In a few, he fusses intently with scrappy lengths of wood and piles of cloth. If the sheer workmanlike anonymity of these images seems eloquent, this is not simply due to the jeans and T-shirt the artist routinely wears. The photos seem to figure the ambiguities of Tuttle’s role in recent art: Not unlike the best of his work, he looks both present and absent, aggressive and recessive. What this means, in career terms, is that although routinely deemed an “artist’s artist” by the cognoscenti, he is far from widely known. Unlike Serra or Smithson, there is only one large-scale work by Tuttle (a decorative wall-size tiling in an upscale Miami development) permanently on view in a (quasi-) public outdoor space. Unlike Hesse, his comfortable New Jersey origins are without tragedy or romance. And unlike all three of these contemporaries, Tuttle’s importance to art since the ’70s has yet to be properly gauged. For although he thrives on exhibitions—they are essential to his practice, in complex ways—he has never had a museum retrospective on this ambitious scale: No less than 329 works are listed in the exhibition catalogue. But this impressive number doesn’t really tell the whole story. Not only are many pieces part of larger suites that are not shown in their entirety, but several are multipartite in and of themselves. Very much so: Two have forty elements, another has twenty-seven. If few other artists so routinely conflate the singular with the multiple, making one into many (and vice versa), few recent retrospectives have managed to offer a similarly compendious sampling of a full four decades, yet been rigorously selective even so.

Tuttle is prolific. No wonder that what he is doing with his back to the camera is making works of art. I’d like to be more specific about his products, but doing so demands some delicacy. What is most exciting—and sometimes most frustrating—about Tuttle’s pieces is the way they inhabit a special twilight zone that keeps them hovering somewhere between their status as images and their existence as things. Which is to suggest, of course, that they are neither paintings nor sculpture. Sooner or later, every commentator is forced to make this basic point.

To say this, however, is to my mind to say next to nothing at all. Why should the work want or need to come across as either? Tuttle began his career at that now-distant moment in the mid-’60s when the settled authority of both media had been undermined. The boundaries only got more fluid as “systems” and “specific objects” and “intermedia” staked their various claims. To judge from the evidence, Tuttle was never much interested in any of these categories as such, just as he set little store by describing or illustrating the look or feel of tangible objects as encountered in the world. At the same time, however, his processes were utterly specific, his works relentlessly handmade. By 1972, in a statement for the catalogue of Documenta 5, he had formulated the new principle that guided his approach: “To make something that looks like itself is . . . the problem, the solution.”

Shouldn’t Tuttle have been elected to the formalist academy, or pressed into service as the poster child for the Beauty so often bemoaned as in short supply?

What a resolution! Here is Tuttle in full gnomic form: circular, elusive, working towards an unsayable idea. Yet to aim for one’s artworks to look like themselves is to do more than give voice to a tautology. This is so, even if the declaration is tautological to the hilt. It also raises the flag for autonomy, originality, and the integral presence of the work of art. With the ’90s behind us, the banner may seem more faded than beleaguered, but for decades it has been Tuttle’s steadfast mission to hold it up.

Given these standards, you might expect rather different critical fortunes than have been the artist’s lot. Should he not have been elected to the formalist academy, or pressed into service as the poster child for the Beauty so often bemoaned as in short supply? Well, yes and no. Such expectations would fail to acknowledge that for Tuttle’s art to “look like itself” is not just a question of appearance—though this is crucial—but of how it inhabits the world. Tuttle’s allegiance is to immediacy and to the senses (not the intellect), and to achieve that extraordinary measure of presence—to make it rhetorical—he must rely utterly on space, light, line, color, shape, size, scale, and surface as the mainstays of his art.

The list is long, and it is hard to think of many of Tuttle’s contemporaries, Hesse excepted, bringing quite these same deep-seated formal considerations—let alone so many of them—to the drawing board. (For some, the drawing board itself is a dinosaur.) But now play the same list back against the sorts of material the artist has chosen for the task: paint, watercolor, wire, paper, rope, plywood, pencil, masking tape, twigs, Styrofoam, waferboard, starch paste, dyed canvas, metal pipe, a Pepsi can. It’s all so ordinary—that’s the issue. A *bricoleur* and forager, over the years Tuttle has aimed to turn this completely recognizable and pedestrian collection into

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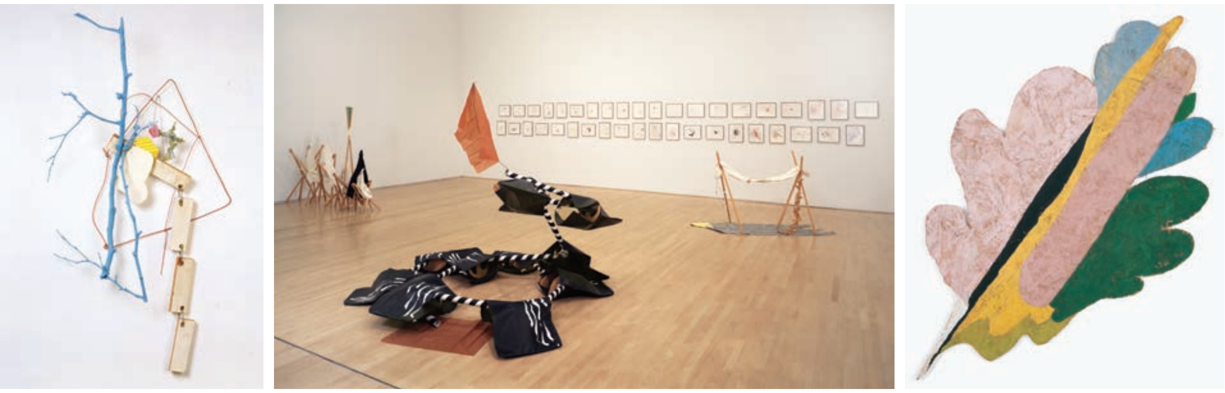

From left: **Richard Tuttle, *Monkey’s Recovery for a Darkened Room, 6*, 1983,** wood, wire, acrylic, matboard, string, and cloth, 40 x 20½ x 12½". **View of “The Art of Richard Tuttle,” San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2005.** Foreground: Richard Tuttle, *There’s No Reason a Good Man Is Hard to Find*, 1988. Photo: Ben Blackwell. ***Waferboard 8*, 1996,** acrylic on waferboard, 36½ x 22¼".

something else—something, to repeat, that looks like itself, though is only ever a putting together of assorted stuff. The results can be more declaratively assembled than the most loyal Constructivist could ever have managed, and yet more magical, more vertiginously impromptu, than any Surrealist in his wildest dreams. For example, although the mundane elements of the breathtaking *Monkey’s Recovery for a Darkened Room, 6*, 1983, seem entirely random, its chained links of wood still manage to fall with odd (sausagelike?) abandon, while two soaring blue branches are just held in place by the energies of a red wire loop.

Sometimes, of course, Tuttle fails. Inevitably: Making something from (nearly) nothing is never easy, and the risk in courting such simplicity is that a work might end up looking like nothing much at all. Indeed, Tuttle’s version of minimalism, first conceived as a corrective to Minimalism proper (that of Robert Morris in 1964, or of Donald Judd the following year) can cut dangerously close to the bone. But that danger is built into his process, in part because cutting is one of the artist’s signature means. From the beginning, that action, as carried out on cloth, plywood, galvanized iron, paper, or lengths of rope, was second only to drawing as a basic move: The one led to the other, and in his hands the two are perfectly paired. The shapes that emerged—a quasi-new language, they even include in *Letters (The Twenty-Six Series)*, 1966, an antialphabet of possible building blocks—take their distance from the sharp edges and precise angles of the cube. Not a man to be ruled by a ruler, Tuttle makes lines and edges bent on preserving the slightly tremulous memory of the moving hand. Crispness is never an issue, nor is industry, let alone the machine. Tuttle’s shapes echo and accommodate each other; they meet gently, with a tentative touch. When in the late ’80s the artist makes use of two titles that reference gendered habits and expectations—*There’s No Reason a Good Man Is Hard to Find* and *Done by Women Not by Men*—there’s every reason to think that these phrases speak to what seems subtle and improvised in the low-key look of his work.

Tuttle’s work can be more declaratively assembled than that of the most loyal Constructivist, and yet more magical than any Surrealist in his wildest dreams.

Over the decades, Tuttle’s art has held on for dear life to these effects. One result, I think, is immediacy—that diffidently assertive look of presence or being at which his art is so often aimed. If my phrasing seems vague or awkward, this is because such effects are difficult to name. They also took time to perfect. In 1969, for example, Scott Burton spoke of the work’s “integrity in all circumstances,” yet also asserted that it places “absolutely no demands on its situation.” At that juncture, when Tuttle’s most recent important achievement was to have trumped painting with a set of home-dyed canvas octagonals in 1967—heirs to both kites and banners—this might have seemed the case. But within a few more years the voice of Tuttle’s work would become ever more active, its look more graphic, though less signlike, and the space around it considerably more important to what it seems to do. Pasted directly to the wall, the long 1970 series of “Paper Octagonals” owes everything—color, texture, even visibility itself—to context and the moment. The same is true of Tuttle’s next work in series, the “Wire Pieces” of 1972. Like the “Paper Octagonals,” their means are minimal—a drawn line, a length of wire, and some shadow—and their perception wholly a matter of a moment in time and a place in space.

If these two series are at once the least physically present and the most spatially dependent works in the exhibition, they are also those that most thoroughly engage the aesthetic dicta of their day. Perceptual contingency could be given no greater play. Nor could impermanence. For these works to appear at all, each must be remade, not once or twice but again and again—for example, at every stop of the show’s long tour. If a template is pressed into service for the “Paper Octagonals,” in the case of the “Wire Pieces,” Tuttle does his remaking via muscular memory, recalling how, in physical terms, he once drew the requisite line. No work (re)produced by this method can ever be precisely the same. Tuttle is the Heraclitus among artists, putting into practice a philosophy of unity and flux.

And beauty. In tracing Tuttle’s development, this exhibition makes it clear that in recent years the artist has simplified (rather than minimalized) his work. He turned his effort towards achieving presence mainly through shaped and painted surfaces (either plywood or waferboard), and thus through both added and inherent color, texture, and line. Again, “neither-painting-nor-sculpture” seems the appropriate (non)word. If such means are still understated, their effects can now be spatially explosive, even wildly lush. Now Burton’s sense of a practice that places no demands on its physical situation seems spot on. Instead, the burden is on the viewer to savor and respond. This is not hard to do. The leaflike blooms of *Waferboard 8*, 1996, bear, in their blue, yellow, green, black, and pink forms, the hues of sun, sky, earth, grass, and body; the winding lines of *New Mexico, New York, #24*, 1998, have the flow and scale of a great alluvial flood plane; the puffy pinks of *20 Pearls (5)*, 2003, invoke dawn’s cloud and the springtime peony. Although one doesn’t have to strain to make these analogies, the fact of the matter is that even now, at its most lyrical moment, Tuttle’s art still looks, as it has always meant to, most like itself. Their particular solutions notwithstanding, some artistic problems do not go away. □

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“The Art of Richard Tuttle” remains on view at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art through Oct. 16; travels to the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Nov. 10, 2005–Feb. 12, 2006; Des Moines Art Center, IA, Mar. 18–June 11, 2006; Dallas Museum of Art, July 15–Oct. 8, 2006; and other venues.