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Richard Tuttle: Please Touch!

Whether you call "What Is the Object?" an exhibit or a collection, the display at Bard Graduate Center is utterly dependent on the good faith of its visitors.



Installation view, "Richard Tuttle: What Is the Object?" with works from his collection, left, including a Venetian glass paperweight and a finely woven African headdress, right, on a whimsical custom display by the artist. Bruce M. White

By Will Heinrich

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The easiest way to describe "What Is The Object?" at the Bard Graduate Center would be to call it a single work of occasional art by the American post-Minimalist Richard Tuttle. Alongside his nearly 60 years of making delicate sculptures and wall works, Tuttle has been a collector of miscellaneous objects that catch his fancy, from an 11th-century brass candlestick made in the Bavarian city of Augsburg to a 19th-century Shaker darning knob with an appealing, egglike shape. And now that he's donating more than 70 of these curios to the Bard Graduate Center — whose

students of material cultural history will know how to take care of them — Tuttle, working with its dean, Peter N. Miller, has designed a display, complete with whimsical, multicolored wooden tables and a few of his own recent collages, to share the collection with the public.

Looked at this way, the whole thing is simply an expansion of Tuttle's long-standing practice of juxtaposing incongruous elements in a way that highlights the precariousness of beauty and meaning. In one of this show's collages, strips of raw canvas painted turquoise and purple are pinned together inside a frame; in another, feathers dyed bright yellow and red stick out of what looks like a pinch of salt.



Richard Tuttle, "Depth, no. 9," 2019, one of several delicate but exuberantly inventive collages that he snuck into "What is the Object?" alongside his collection of other artists' and artisans' work. Richard Tuttle; Bruce M. White/Christina Clare Ewald

The trick, though, is that visitors are allowed to handle the curios, as well as the accompanying index cards on which Tuttle has made notes about their provenance and formal qualities. And whether you react to this possibility with eagerness or trepidation — rush to heft the black wooden duck decoy or nervously dab a single fingertip against the beaver fur hat — you may overlook what a serious challenge it is to ordinary exhibitions.

Most museums establish the line between art works and visitors with glass panels, velvet ropes, guards and alarm systems, making very clear where the power lies. Tuttle's display, by contrast, feels almost painfully tenuous and vulnerable. It's utterly dependent on the good faith of its

visitors, not chiefly because they could move or damage things, though they could, but because without the ordinary velvet-rope cues, they have to make such an imaginative leap to see what they're looking at as an exhibition at all.

Still, what struck me even more than that was the unexpected richness of running my fingers along a notched "tramp art" cigar box, or feeling the slick surface of a Koranic writing tablet from Somalia. I had become so used to meeting art through my eyes alone that I had forgotten what an impoverished way that is to experience the world.

What Is the Object?

Through July 10, Bard Graduate Center Gallery, 18 West 86th Street, Manhattan. 212-501-3023, bgc.bard.edu.

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