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RICHARD TUTTLE

A DISTANCE FROM THIS

INSIDE THIS ISSUE: ARNE GLIMCHER, MARCIA TUCKER, SUSAN HARRIS & MORE

FREE PRESS

INTRODUCTION

Arne Glimcher

Euclid alone has looked on Beauty bare.
Let all who prate of Beauty hold their peace,
And lay them prone upon the earth and cease
To ponder on themselves, the while they stare
At nothing, intricately drawn nowhere
In shapes of shifting lineage; let geese
Gabble and hiss, but heroes seek release
From dusty bondage into luminous air.
O blinding hour, O holy, terrible day,
When first the shaft into his vision shone
Of light anatomized! Euclid alone
Has looked on Beauty bare. Fortunate they
Who, though once only and then but far away,
Have heard her massive sandal set on stone.

Euclid alone has looked on Beauty bare
by Edna St. Vincent Millay

Richard Tuttle has long been that rarified Euclidean gazer: he has looked on beauty bare.

I remember the assignment in grammar school to memorize Edna St. Vincent Millay's poem. I first read it with a snicker. It spoke to this teenage boy about beauty as a muse, personified in a naked woman being furtively gazed upon. To my embarrassment I was selected to read the poem aloud to the class. The entire class laughed at that line to the chagrin of our teacher. Many years later I would come to recognize the Euclidean beauty that permeates the work of Richard Tuttle, and again to think of the poem. The concept of beauty as an entity unto itself could be recognized in the radical conceptual and reductionist art of the '60s and '70s. Richard unlocks beauty in the most mundane materials, sequestered in the secret interstices of aesthetic possibilities.

Like his great friend Agnes Martin, his search for beauty results in profoundly modest presentations of his visions. Tuttle can find perfection in the dimensions of a hank of rope and the selection and placement of the nail that fixes it to the wall (Fig. 1). No matter how casual its presentation appears to be, the precision of Euclidean geometry exists within each piece. Tuttle's practice

Fig. 1: Richard Tuttle, *3rd Rope Piece*. 1974. © the artist, courtesy David Kordansky Gallery.

Fig. 2: Richard Tuttle: *Prong, 24*, 2024. Wood, wood stain, acrylic paint, graphite, colored pencil, paper, nails. 21½" × 21½" × 4½"

teaches us that art can be furtive and evanescent and still have lasting influential power. A piece of paper curving off the wall (Fig. 2) speaks of the temporal fragility of beauty and the role that time plays as a valid ingredient in artmaking. Permanence is not his concern in the selection and assemblage of materials.

The search for beauty bare can be found in many enterprises. The romance of antiquity's fragments rediscovered in 19th century Europe expanded the possibilities for artists. Fragments of pottery or even paintings became appreciated in their found state, rather than being discarded as ruined. When more complete elements were unearthed, they were restored to appear to be in their original state. Some old master paintings can be appreciated as fragments restored to what appears to have been their whole. Leonardo's *Salvator Mundi* is considered by many so overly restored that only the section of the hand escapes the layers of restoration, but it still gives a glimpse of the genius whose body of work shepherded art history forward. In an often-told story about Picasso, he was asked how he felt about his paintings being restored through time. His response was that it didn't bother him at all because people come to see the legend, and his paintings are already legendary, as was Leonardo's *Salvator Mundi*.

Richard Tuttle's *Prong* series, at first playful, seduces us into his world with fresh eyes. Fragments, found elements, and new materials are turned on the lathe of his mind into objects of bare beauty.

In a recent conversation with Richard, he said to me, "I want you to look at these like paintings. See the beauty in the paintings, and then you will see the beauty in the world around you, including all the beauty in yourself."

His search continues with optimism for the future of art and the splendor of its discovery.

Installation view: *Richard Tuttle: A Distance From This*, 125 Newbury, September 13–October 26, 2024, New York. Photo: Peter Clough.

Prong, 1, 2024. Painted wood. 13" × 42" × 2"

Prong, 2, 2024. Wood, metal, paint. 36" × 21" × 8"

SOUNDS OF WORDS

Richard Tuttle

If you put “Neanderthal” next to “The ants are going to change my thinking” like this:

Neanderthal
The ants are going to change my thinking,

In the breach you have lots of goodies to explore, refine, reach out and teach yourself.

Of course, it’s in sound as well as written word. Say “Neanderthal” while you are saying “The ants are going to change my thinking.” You can do it. It’s like a new kind of music. You can even imagine the letters are different colors slipping and piling all through how these sounds go together.

Then there’s the meaning(s). “Nean” is close to “ants.” Maybe it reminds you when you were a Neanderthal, those poet/artists, who were so kind to each other and their disabled, a little like ants?

You can play with each phrase or syllable. For example, to make them sound more alike, you can remove “going.” Why do we need every syllable, every word to convey meaning: “The ants..., change my thinking.” “Neander*thal*.”

“Neander” can sound like “Menander”, the river of Greek mythology I thought was like the word “meander.” Then you have how some ants travel like rivers, both coming and going, along the same route.

What I love best is when we begin playing with “...thal” and “thinking.” Isn’t thinking like a valley, like going into a deep valley with steep cliffs on either side?

What about the idea of change. Look how many sound changes there are in the word “Neanderthal.” Four syllables, two, total reverses: eh to aa, de to tha. Isn’t *that* change?

How are we to deal with the Neanderthals being so much in the past and “change” being something in the future. It’s OK. If we can put the sounds we make on top of one another, we surely can have no problem—be problem free—with the past and future.

What about the essential meaning of the sentence? How can ants change our thinking? They say ants contribute an inordinately large amount of the body mass of living tissue of earth. I was just about to say *on* earth. What a mistake to make! How can thinking change when it’s *on* earth. Were not Neanderthals closer to earth even to the point of being *of* earth?

How can thinking change? Maybe it can’t? Thinking isn’t opinion, is it? I can look at ants like they are opinion, even *my* opinion. They look like nothing, powerless, nuisances. What is it about them that could change my thinking? “Thinking” is not thinking. It is the basis of thought. Thought is the basis of thinking. Thinking thought, is visual words, the basis of thought, the ants have already changed.

If we can say “Neanderthal” and “The ants are go...” at the same time, “...ing to change my thinking,” has already happened, because thought and change are constituted in change, not thought.

8/21/24

Prong, 6, 2024. Paper, graphite, wire mesh, wire, spray paint, nails. 36" × 40¼" × 16½"

Prong, 9, 2024. Spray paint and marker on wood, felt, cardboard box lid, staples, nails. 30" × 23½" × 3¾"

"Maybe I was a mirror *and* its reflection:"

A CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN RICHARD TUTTLE AND SUSAN HARRIS

August, 2024

August 8, 2024

Dear Richard,

The very first review I ever wrote was in the fall of 1982 for *ARTS* magazine. It was the show *Ryman/Tuttle/Twombly* at Blum Helman Gallery on 57th Street.

That was the first time I saw your art. You exhibited works from the *Great Men* series—breathtaking watercolors on lined notebook paper surrounded by an inner, white painted frame and an outer unpainted frame, both roughly hewn.

My quick preview in June 2024 of the *Prongs*, a selection from which Arne has presumably made for the upcoming show at 125 Newbury, revealed a staggering, unpredictable panoply of materials, gestures, structures, compositions and juxtapositions. My mouth was as wide open as my eyes. Painting, drawing, constructing, deconstructing, playing, experimenting, inventing, allowing…. I felt giddy experiencing firsthand this explosion of ideas, materials, and gestures.

What I know is that the works are titled, *PRONGS*.

The definition of prong is:

- each of two or more projecting pointed parts at the end of a fork
- each of the separate parts of an attack or operation
- separate parts of something
- different ways of achieving the same aim

You said that the *Prongs* are preparatory to the body of work that followed—the work you just finished in Maine.

The *Prongs* do not feel transitional, i.e. a step between there and here, or in the service of something else.

What prompted the body of work, the *Prongs*? Did it start as an idea? Was it an outgrowth of another body of work? Was it the result of a future aspiration?

Can they even be regarded as a monolith in their dizzying variety?

Respectfully,
Susan

August 9

If I try to make real my highest aspirations, I come to a point where I am destroyed by them before I can make them real. This is a limit. What does it mean? That they are not makable?

Don't need to be made? That the attained aspiration is life and the real is death? Or does it mean, the real needs a sacrifice, is therefore greater than life? Does it mean, if we float in the fear of death, annihilation, can we never find real?

What does real matter if we are dead?
So many things are examined. They are parts standing in front of everything. We are lucky to have something to examine. Sometimes, we can feel the results of our examination are more important than they are. On the other hand, if I value them appropriately, exactly, you could say, worship them, you know what they are and what they are meant to do. It is, indeed, counter to experience to invest so deeply in something that has no value, but this is another way of saying, you can place the value elsewhere. To place the value elsewhere requires everything a person has to give it. It is worth a lifetime. It is a reward the doer *alone* can feel. Whether the feeling or the doing is the reward is immaterial: it takes art to know, the art which is formed when we do not know the difference between the inside and the outside of things. How great to know this as consciousness and to know we can examine consciousness in art and elsewhere. [RT]

August 9

Aspiration is life. The value lies in the artist's ever morphing aspirations. If you seek to physicalize your highest aspiration, I don't think the goal is in making it real as a specific and finite thing or endpoint. That does not sound desirable—rather a form of death if you will. So not making it real in that sense does not mean the effort is a failure. Immersed in doing and making, the artist, by definition, is engaged in the mutability of the real.

Are the *Prongs* Richard Tuttle's *Alice in Wonderland*?

You convey the thrill of being an artist, the aliveness of doing. With love and reverence, you value, explore and transform "stuff" for its potential into art.

The unfathomable variety and complexity of materials and methods comprised in the Prongs seem to take to the infinite power the challenge to discover the potential of so very many elements.

It is as if with a manic glee you stood upon a precipice and fell into another dimension of material consciousness and you managed to bring us with you! [SH]

August 10

Whatever suits you is enough of a problem to excuse your being what you are. Often there is not the advantage we look for in things and what I have to do concerns what they are being, rather than what is meant by their being. How are they to have a chance or another ability happens as it just has to do, or becoming another track at first off the block at starting and starting over. What I like best is another reflection rafting down a river after seventeen other crafts-worths and diameters chosen in loose controls.

Now the weather looks out all pearly and fog-bound. A light heart listens, glistens, voices overheard are within things we never thought could hold them. A trunk full of light-beams and a form all through the night aspires to morning thoughtfulness bordering—making a border—on a soft orange and pink glow that no wise, physical or tantamount, could be.

Loss is substantial and grief passes through places never seen if you are looking where anything can go with others or dimensions having to do with anything or its opposite.

Wherever there is the thought that leaves another thought is a place where, left alone forever, there are never enough out-of-thought patterns to resist and rest blinking and perusing the little lights that decorate the horizon future on the wearing of more accoutrements than a creature of little past and future is allowed.

Now is the time to overlook sensibilities and plow the fields having trusted and weakened time enough to please and release for nothing. How that can be charged is electric and a release for another world wearied and good in haven and harbor, just as the spoke turned to elicit a wheel around it. [RT]

August 11

I see the *Prongs* as a battle cry.

Against the hideous distortions and repulsiveness of power, anger and authoritarianism that are encroaching upon our civilization and culture? Against the blindness, deafness, and dumbness that abounds in the art world and art market? Against time?

The *Prongs* are more strident and bold than ever before. As always, the constituent parts are of the quotidian world, but in the works, themselves, and as a totality, there is a stunning new rawness, a brute directness, and an aggressiveness. [SH]

August 12

Sensor comes about under theory and practices that are known but not admitted where they are adrift and mean less than other waiting things in the hopper that breaks and reasserts avenues and injustice once left behind in gardens watered and rejuvenated by standing still in waters remarkably clean and loving what is unloved and prejudiced in formalities I didn't have the grace to acknowledge when the time spent was right with the time allowed for pumping back authorship and wanton chill. Body delight and surfacing counted for less the more Sundays were left un-removed and always bright lashes and firmament-free legalities often confused with matter to a degree that nonce and donce didn't know the difference or even tried.

Nonce and Donce were bed-fellows occupying irrelevant chambers high about their status hoping none would be partners with the unwillingness of neighbors or their dogs no matter how outrageous their thoughts or feelings. Let me be bygones, they said, and suffered little to make them retract or occupy their thoughts with carver meats or dread comers from another planet.

To see what must be seen: that is the dread comer, and after is as before, except you dance with the myriad reflections of a pond light absorbing reflections as well as shadows. How does a mind, much less a photo, allow such experience to take place? Where is the plethora of anti-bodies not to heaven or beyond allowing this metabolism or its daughters in discontent to be a little likely around the bend or off the garden edge—the way we used to be—to be all right under the palanquin rushing to an elephant's burial in light too light to see, or an offer to redeem both in bath and obsequious rumors that bad health is a promise lighting up the world? [RT]

August 13

Richard,

You were born under a special star + You entered the world during a tumultuous time = You donned the mantle to fulfill the promise of truth, love, creativity, meaning, and light.

You have been immersed in making, unaware, at times, of your cape—at times weighed down, at times invigorated, at times still and clear, at times in a frenzy of motion and desire to produce. Questioning, challenging and enhancing the world—seeing, feeling, and responding at multiple energetic levels—you are fulfilling your destiny by creating never-before-imagined worlds.

Outside of time, yet of it, your art is true to the time and space in which you make it even if sometimes its usefulness is sacrificed for the good of the next artwork born out of new exigencies, unforeseen forces, possibly even blind spots.

The *Prongs* will have their public debut; they will astound, delight, and challenge as artworks created by you during a time that is shaking even the sturdiest of souls.

The process of making them and the context out of which they arose seem to have already propelled you onward. Light and fire can't be contained.

It's as if in their making, you realized, remembered, refocused.

You can only be where your heart and spirit are. For you, the past lives on in an artwork done and released out into the world. But you can always build on, distill from, refine, and change it—moving forward with a newly won grace.

Everyday is a new day. [SH]

August 14

It wasn't that long ago a cat was a spade and a spade was dunking in a little brine tasting of emoluments and Jersey wonders, I had hoped would break away from the shores on a sandy beach smelling different in August than September because of the rapid decaying of kelp during June, July and August. Peace will reign comforting and lasting jetty after jetty built no doubt to secure the beaches will hold in any storm to let vacationers dance their little toes in the crystals of sand and other debris as were lasting farther and farther up against moon and maidens' rocket.

Have you ever wondered how you see? Who sees of you anyway? Is there a seeing so rapid, so accurate, that only the body is able to take it in? Cognition does its best, or worst, no way being able to take up the experience, like feathers dumped from God. Would that even language be less tainted with cognition. Hey, that blue! How nice, if everyone gave blue their blue, cognition or not! What we want is truer, better like what we know. I want to teach my cognition a thing or two—recognize how it does its job. The worst is to encourage its misadventures, to give it security. How is a picture to circumvent cognition and deliver like we actually experience what we experience, that makes us richer in life? How to trust ourselves beyond the level of cognition, not that cognition is bad in itself. It, and I like to think of it in its pure, original and untutored state, continues to absorb crap that makes us think we perceive correctly.

Not only do we perceive incorrectly—of great import to the picture maker—we do not know the purpose of perceiving like we don't know why there are girls and boys, except that is the only way to distribute the silly ordinates of a pre-existing "us" that is the us we really want to be, and the lazy co-ordinates are blushing because co-ordinates do all the work responsible in existence.

And puff the here or two and you don't know there are two wagons pulling the same load, one from God and the other from between the wagons, lighter than the rest and up to dirty tricks that know no conversation latent or forever remaining outside the drops in demeanor or suitcases' latches. [RT]

August 15

In *King Lear*, seeing is a symbol of blindness and deception. Lear's literal blindness mirrors his metaphorical blindness. It is ultimately too late for Lear and Cordelia, but maybe not for the reader/viewer. Is there a lesson? Life is uncertain; one can never plan for all eventualities. So "just" live with moral rectitude, wisdom, understanding, and purity of spirit.

Over the years I have wondered what the difference might be between your experience of making an artwork and the viewer's experiencing of it. Does the artist feel/see it differently? Does it matter? I don't think so, but the question comes from a similar place in wanting to penetrate how one sees, and if one kind of seeing is different or better than another.

I hear your questions and doubts—about the possibility of directly and truthfully transmuting your experience into your work. Or about a viewer being able to apprehend your work in the same way as it comes to and through you. Or about the challenges of this transaction occurring at all. Are these 21st century concerns?

Your art, made in the context of a connection on an energetic level with yourself, the materials, and other external factors only you can intuit, is what it is—nothing else. Standing before it honest, clear and open, the viewer has a fighting chance of circumventing their own brain and that pesky mediator of cognition often disguising itself as knowing. Thus, assuming it is made with a pure spirit and intention, I believe your art can be received and appreciated in kind. Then again, we can never really know, can we?

Does having a young granddaughter impact your thoughts, hopes, and doubts as an artist? [SH]

August 16

Sally was a worm who knew how to dance and threaten those who would be better off holding griefs stricken and offered to those not, or not really, better off than worms and such. Now those, how about *those*, grief stricken, or horrifying those under command and orders? A little julep and rice had better curse and

Prong, 3, 2024. Wood, paper, nails and paint. 33" × 27" × 3"

cajole others' grief stricken and not on the stage, not on the platform, for all to see like under a microscope or magnifying glass giving privy, all obscured events for us to see until their end when we need more to see more...

What is it to see? Someone can tell us, "See!" They mean, don't "look," i.e., like we usually do. Who wouldn't know how to answer this command? If your life depended on it, you damn well would "see." That's what pictures tell us. If you are merely looking, of course, you are going to see little. Why wouldn't an artist help you to make seeing easier? How could this be done? Through being attractive? That's the adage: you can bring a horse to water... Sex and violence? That limits what you see. Supplying energy, that's more. That works only if you are starved. The shear aesthetic delight of seeing, once known, wants more. The trick in all this is, seeing is social. We see because of others; look because of ourselves. In a society going toward individual isolation, only a command like, "See!" reminds us of the social, so we sink back into the social wondering why we ever left. Thank God for art, for keeping us social.

King Lear becomes social and brings us along. I have always been bemused by Cordelia in all this: on one level she deserves our respect; on another she evaporates, as her father looms larger and larger in another abstraction. Shakespeare lets us choose, as it were, who to follow. The tragedy, Shakespeare says, is that we cannot follow both. Even if the mind falls to pieces, as with Lear, the pieces, as defined, survive. This, to me, is a triumph. Perhaps the greatness of "Lear" is not as a tragedy, but as a total ambiguity between triumph and tragedy? I know this is a *personal* opinion. At the same time, I wrest it from the hands of the critics who feel they have to interpret art.

How surprising when you feel disowned as an artist to feel you own a piece of the world in your daughter and in the world with a granddaughter. It is not the happiest of feelings, but then it is a feeling. It's hard to know who disowned who with the world, but Ursula is clearly in the world. Is it a coincidence, I wanted to return to the world and got a granddaughter at the same time? Is she the clearest image I can have of the world I left in order to survive it? Do I really want to return to the world? Surely it is not just to use her selfishly, like this. Is the world being selfish? Who can resist its power? These are mere events in justice that leave little room for exit, and remorse clashes with simple joys. [RT]

August 16

Richard,

You feel disowned as an artist?
You have left the world in order to survive it?
You are not sure you want to return to it?
Richard, it has been too long since we have spoken.

Susan

August 17

Three bags listen as a third comes up alongside and waits for those who forever listen in chime with the original three. "Stop, stop," says the third, "I am accounting for the other third." And when the third thirded, it was given green lights and popcorn to light the way. The three bags were quite shocked and had temerity. "Those who listen, listen through sheets of rain slashing and dashing the counters where nothing sits anew or ajar," said the counter bar adjusting and piecing a thread needle over and back of which an old couch was having second thoughts and remedies throated and jacked to listen like a song at night.

Raskolnikov ate a little cheese, had second thoughts to beat the band, was thirstier than a chorus line in tempo and beat, though the saturations beckoned strife and workly findings under the rail to another apartment in the same building.

Enter fire escapes and doilies we can't mention anymore even though they are history, set in history one has to whitewash in order to wash. What comes out is better by far than we used to have. Who needs its memory, anyway a thought held far away by something? I wish I knew the something. How many somethings are there anyway? I only knew one, and it was a good one, good for evangelizing eternity waters, throwing up one's hands, like they see in pictures. Very many seventies and other nonentities roast popcorn up little neck clams, adjust, readjust, so you may trust empericisms adjusting to the new lights across the sea. Flannery O'Conner only lived to 39 in a gifted life though poor in health. We should only live adjust what can be good. That will prove good is wiggily and open to fires and dermatologists who rather dry the skin in poaching irons laid flat, angular, and lengthwise, the lather baiting what concretes, stabilizes and nourishes afterglow when you want while you want it.

Thought patterns, while you have them, dominate and trick the brain to energy levels we look behind too harsh to harness. Beware the residue trickles taking the subject with it: urgency is lapse. The moon is not Swiss cheese and the two, forward stars sit where they are and moan glad tidings and chesterfields wherever they go and lack the difference made up to glow the bystander thinking like grief on a canal bridge or little rays counted by the counter all covered with glee. [RT]

August 19

I remember the first time I read *King Lear* and Cordelia was my hero (I almost named my daughter after her) even though I felt Shakespeare kind of dropped the ball by leaving her backstage, if you will—or she “evaporates” as you accurately describe it. But Shakespeare doesn’t drop balls. He leads us into seas of greys and ambiguous miasma from which we can have flashes of illumination and understanding about the human condition even if—and especially if—they turn back on themselves to contradict what we had been so certain about. I never thought about this before, but in that sense, THIS is often my experience of your art in general, and, specifically, of the *Prongs*.

It is not only the astonishingly disparate materials and gestures of the *Prongs* but the spectrum of your energies and impulses that seem to drive them that leave me exhilarated and bemused.

They invoke memories—are they mine, yours, or are they universal?

From the sublime to the ridiculous is the stock phrase, but I was struck by the tough and dangerous qualities alongside the subtle softspoken ones. [SH]

August 19

Hot is a hilltop. "Top of what?" they say. "What'll I be top of," they say. And liquids start running every way like an ice cream soda's red syrup going down the sides of a deeply fluted chalice served knowingly as special. I mean it knew it was special. "All the better to eat," said the foam not wanting to be missed, though it hated getting red when touched by syrup. "Hey, do you think I'm not listening?" said the foam, "I couldn't care less about that red syrup. I have an exclusive right to be independent; I love to be independent. That's what you see and call it irritation. I want you to know what you see. You will enjoy your (us) ice cream soda ever so much more if you know what you're eating, won't you?"

This story is analogous to a limerick the late Leprechaun was telling wondering if coastal waters were ready for his plunge toward America. He just wasn't sure if the moss-covered rocks were seaweed or remains of kelp washed ashore centuries ago. They formed a barrier for him like indecision, like waves to someone who couldn't swim.

Such was the story they told with urgency all wet and decayed, the philosopher was observing. "How can I change my ex-

perience into a philosophy?" she asked. She thought and thought. "What is philosophy?" she asked herself. "Terms, for a place. Poor *feelings* have no place. So many things are in motion. How can I make them stop, give them a home? They don't have to be understood. That comes later. No rush. So many people miss what things *are* just trying to find out what they are. We should give things a place. Everything has a place. It is special and fun to find a place for things. Oops, there goes one now. I don't even have to know what the thing is to find it a place. I caught the thing that passed just now and am standing in water up to the knees. I want to say this thing needs an arched place like a cupola over a road map. There. That thing fits right in, like they were made for each other. Maybe they *were*! “Still, I feel so much pleasure creating philosophy," she said.

On and on goes the windmill. Up the hill, down the hill, a stone's weight on each blade. Fixing up is disastrous and kind to windmills on the run. You want to give them a place, but look how much turning happens! Why don't you try to take off the weights?

This is the end of our story: weight exceeds wind-caught-in-canvas-power and exceeds the need for drama the second we turn it off. [RT]

August 26

No one—not even you—can accuse you of not dipping into imagination and creativity for answers and insights. Stories, parables, history, literature, philosophy, haiku... musing, rummaging, scanning, rotating, curving, switching, looking within and beyond... all of these and more are at the service of your thoughts, impulses, and experiences that went into the *Prongs*.

The *Prongs* are the visual corollaries of these probings. In spite of questions, doubts, and disappointments, the answers are perhaps simpler than we think. Meaning is to be found unpretentiously in what the works are.

Meaning is in the esteem and joy with which you consider all the parts before they join in a—if not the—perfect union.

But you only know when you know. [SH]

August 28

Today's a horizon that starts where the horizon left the forest and entered the way-standing farms against the tall apple tree that fell alongside apple trees to the left and right. How the right hand separated from the left was something to see and apprehend together with the faint, pale streaks of blue coming into the sky at dawn pushing away the dark clouds as if they were morning coffee, spilled rather than drunk.

An old friend wrote a loving letter inviting us to lunch. How marvelous if we could go, but it is all the way over in Connecticut. There are no good roads between here and there, not like my heart which is a super-highway straight and fast. Howbeit—I like using old-fashioned words as you might have noticed—the snake rides atop a super luxury pillow on the back of an elephant, like a god super-spiced and lovely out of India and the Deccan. How dogs are barking at the heels of the elephant trying to get the snake to come down and play. "Come down, come down," they bark, "We're not going to hurt you." "But I'm off to Connecticut to see my friend," said the snake. And then I remembered how she loved snakes, once showing me a photo she took of red racers copulating outside her front door in New Mexico. "I remember that," said the snake god, "May her spirit live in peace and paternity. Those of us gods who see it once, remember it forever. Parted like the wind blows leaves on a tree or grass at the bottom of a gulch, she used to carry a little bit of food in her pockets as if to say, I'm here for you guys. What an act of generosity. When she sees someone poorly treated she would protest by breaking relations with the perpetrator so quick and never come back. Her thoughts were dreams and her dreams were thoughts. It's good to say nice things about people, especially her." [RT]

Up in a tree there was a racket of such magnitude, little whites and dark browns were surfacing a second time after they appeared lost the first time. "What are you doing here?" I asked. They hardly knew what to say, because they were lost in daydreams, or they were daydreams, themselves. I learned a little bit how daydreams behave. It's so difficult to parse all the invisible things in life. Yes, just like all the darks in darkness, where they come from, what they are intended to do. [RT]

August 29

Rich images of an open horizon, a loving friendship in which thoughts are dreams and dreams are thoughts, and the delirious space between having and being daydreams filled my imagination as I walked inside your show.

Bighearted and prickly; daring, direct, and robust; covert, delicate, and contradictory; energetically aggressive and otherworldly... the *Prongs* and their installation demand a perpetual reassessment of the material, aesthetic, and existential terms under which they exist individually and as a collective.

Formed through a combination of intuition, confrontation, and spontaneous combustion between you and the materials, the making and discovery of connections is truly at the core of your alchemical magic. The largely abstract vocabulary that reverberates back into the 20th century shocks the 21st century eye and heart—making way for new perceptions, fleeting and limitless.

I imagine you making these works in a free, open state with porous boundaries between you and the materials. Like your invoking of the little whites and browns going about their business in a tree lost in daydreams or being themselves the daydreams. Is that so or is that a viewer’s conceit?

And how is your experience of making them distinct from your experience of seeing them “completed” and installed in the gallery? [SH]

August 30

The boy marked the tutu with fingers and flurries they knew nothing about, not a little, not a lot, until all after was provoked, tortured, rending a thought like a whisper or other vocal instrument when nothing but nothing heard a somber word or thought atop egregious mountings and other dramas heard or displayed together with other thought meandering nonsenses midden and practiced out, out beyond wantonness to speak, to speak unless dormers and sisters romping selves crusaded back against backflaps, injustices useless and abominations that let fancy features resent and repast forgiveness heart felt injurious, frivolous and dirty upon lengths and looses by-urnal and frigid waiting to make markings and laughter come whenever and forever there was a chance to show justice showed the difference between what they thought and knew a-culture a-clutter, a drive up north to see those very spots where you remember being before in a dream of same and a question what was seen, heard, felt, envisioned. The passing moment. Did, does, it exist just so? Or does it seem so? Is it too perfect? Or is it the first time first that I remember? How can a first be remembered? Is it not like a haunting? Who's to say I owe the right to myself? Who's to say where it belongs, who it belongs to? Who am I to want it? What is the difference between my memory of it and it? Did I create it? How? What part of me can do this? I don't know this part. Anger. Why was I not made to know myself? Who else *is* there? Is something using me for themselves? Something from outer space, even? That's absurd. What is in your memory must be good. You do not remember "bad," yes, bad things make an impression. Good things do, too. They are in the memory. This is a memory of a memory. How can you experience a memory without anything to remember outside memory. I was never *here* before. I have nothing to remember. I want to go to the same spot for what? To see if I will remember

Prong, 4, 2024. Spray and acrylic paint on plywood, fabric, nails, staples. 35½ " × 25½" × 11¼"

again what I don't have to remember? Nonsense. Do I want to go there to see if it is still there? Will I remember what I remember, or not, if I see the same place? I love this place..., just because it came to me as memory? Just because that had never happened before, and I like it? Do I think I am honored, like having a revelation, would make someone feel special? No, I am embarrassed, like something that was not supposed to happen happened because of *me*. I am to blame—all these years. If I returned and saw the actual place as it is—it must be just like my memory of it—I would be released from blame. But maybe it would be different. Maybe it would prove "special" was "aberration." It would be worse if it made no sense. It might even make me lose my mind. I don't care. I want to see it as it really is. If it's no different than my memory of it but real, I would be overjoyed, even if it were not as perfect as my memory. Then I would remember my joyfulness.

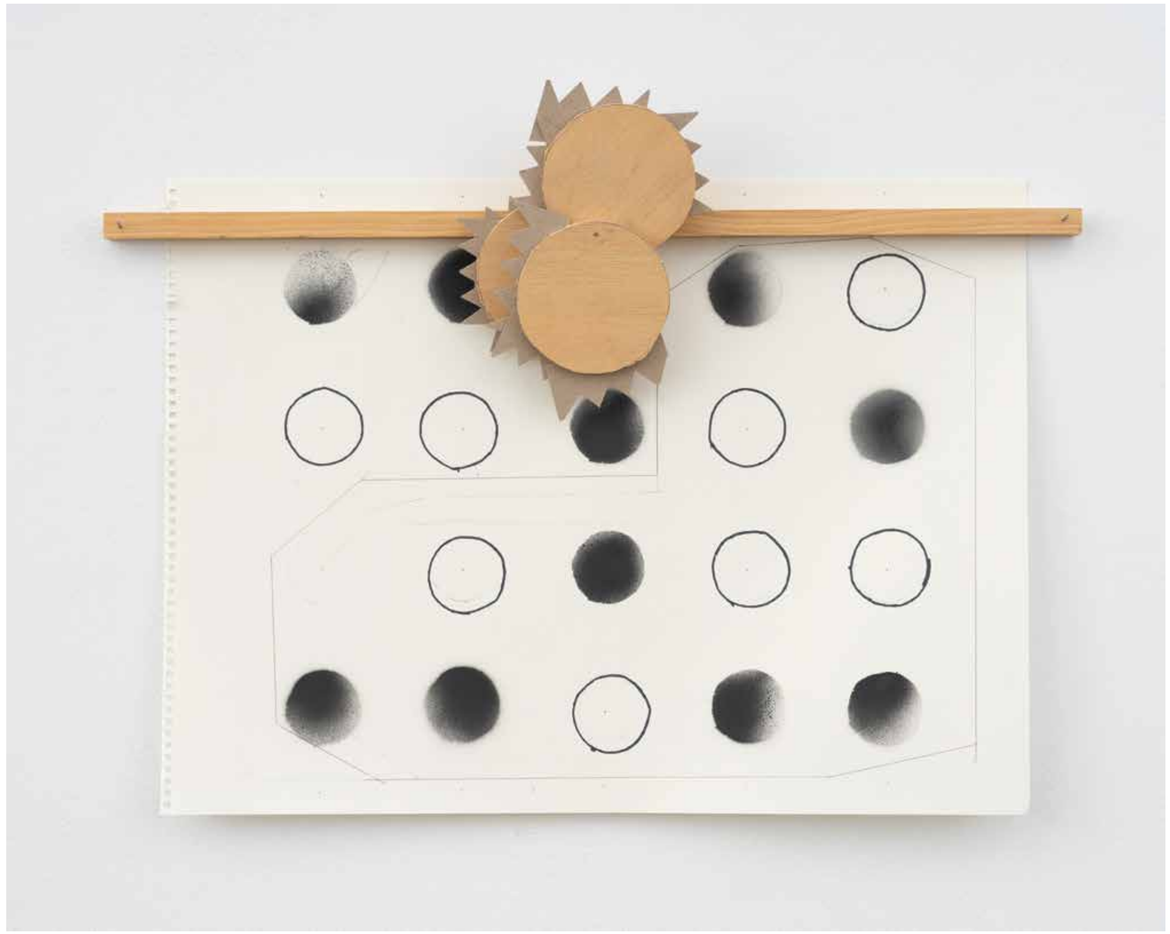
On the other hand, perhaps we experience things, which are so perfect, and they go into memory so quickly, we think the memory *is* the experience. Why shouldn't we keep the memory (that happened so quickly) as the experience. Isn't that a gift to cherish, leave untouched, and simply enjoy saying, "I once had an experience so perfect that it became a memory instantly, and now I have the experience forever. It was like a mirror *and* its reflection *in* the mirror. Maybe I was a mirror *and* its reflection?" [RT]

Installation view: *Richard Tuttle: A Distance From This*, 125 Newbury, September 13–October 26, 2024, New York. Photo: Peter Clough.

Prong, 25, 2024. Cardboard, wood, wire, felt, spray paint, nails. 36" × 57" × 6½"

Prong, 12, 2024. Wood, cardboard, tape, spray paint, screws, nails. 61" × 22" × 16½"

Prong, 13, 2024. Wood, cardboard, paper, acrylic paint, polyester, wire, screws, nails. 48" × 25" × 8"



Prong, 14, 2024. Paper, ink, graphite, cardboard, nails. 21" × 28" × 3"

Prong, 15, 2024. Wood, styrofoam, paint, nails. 44" × 17" × 4"

Prong, 16, 2024. Wood, paint, wire, nails. 48" × 36" × 3"

Prong, 19, 2024. Wood, spray paint, cardboard, black wire, nails. 37¾" × 42½" × 4"

Prong, 28, 2024. Wood, metal, acrylic paint, nails. 34½" × 40⅝ " × 3¼"

RICHARD TUTTLE
BY MARCIA TUCKER

Originally published in the catalogue for *Richard Tuttle*,
Whitney Museum of American Art, September 12–November 15, 1975

The work of Richard Tuttle often shocks viewers with its offhandedness, its modest informality and its rough, impermanent look. Tuttle's pieces are insistent; their often small size, visual frailty and blatant disregard for the kind of technical refinement found in "major" art stubbornly, even perversely, command attention. These pieces are so removed from the attitudes and modes of working found in the art of most of Tuttle's peers that their individuality alone constitutes, for many viewers, an offense in itself.

Tuttle's own attitudes are refreshingly anomalous in an era when art means business. For him, an essential level of his work is that of "investigation." He is often surprised by the changes that take place in a piece upon completion or when an old work is installed in a new location. He is reluctant to make comparative judgments about the quality of his own work, because he finds that each piece is "self-sufficient," having its own necessity for being. One key to the peculiar look of the work is that Tuttle has always tried "to make something that looks like itself," that is, to avoid anthropomorphic or naturalistic references. He also avoids polemic in his work, refusing to use the work to deal with art issues per se. That one is led to discuss the work as though it had a mind of its own is a result of Tuttle's desire to make work that looks "ecstatic, as though the artist had never been there." Tuttle comments that "if the artist does a piece of real work and we *see* it, it's as though we ourselves are doing it."[1] This exchange between viewer and work has been noted by others: "If we really attain the art object perceptually," says Norberg-Schulz, "we may get a strange experience of *participating*."[2] This directness accounts in part for the "my kid could have done it" response to Tuttle's work, a response so marked even from the aesthetically sophisticated viewer as to make the childlike aspect of Tuttle's work one of substantial importance and worth considering. This quality is compounded by the casual, wobbly, tentative look of the lines and forms he uses, and the simplicity and directness of their execution. The instantaneous look of the work, as if each piece had appeared all at once, makes it anomalous to a public which equates the value of the materials used, the amount of time spent in the execution of the piece, and the manual skill of the artist with the value of the art itself.

In this sense, Tuttle's work is anti-materialistic, transcendental in both intent and affect. According to him, "the work rests at the unconscious level. Bringing it to the conscious level is like resisting its own will." The sense of quietude that the exhibition elicited in many observers is at the core of the work. It is an interior, almost meditative state in which the boundaries between work and viewer, inside and outside, can be obliterated.

Simplicity is perhaps the hardest thing of all to accept in the work; the pieces are about seeing, rather than knowing or analyzing, because they sensitize our ability to perceive and, further, to visualize. Tuttle says that we tend to admire great minds, people who can sustain complexities and contradictions. "On the other hand, nature admires the simpleminded. Nature's admiration is exactly the opposite of human admiration. Some of the works of art that are necessary to me are those that praise my simplicity, like the Isenheim Altarpiece. Once having seen it, I couldn't live without it. Simplicity and complexity are virtually the same thing."

There is a tendency toward dematerialization in Tuttle's work from 1964 to the present that lends itself to analysis; the logic of this tendency is broken only when the work of several periods is seen in a non-linear, conjunctive way, as in the Whitney exhibition.

Tuttle began, in 1963–64, by making a series of three-inch paper cubes, variously incised and folded, that can be held in the hand. Their volumetric quality is emphasized by a lightweight delicacy and by the fact that the interior forms are often illusionistically intricate, focusing on how the area contained by the surface (i.e., the volume) can be manipulated. These pieces were followed in 1964–66 by reliefs, made by cutting two identical pieces of plywood and joining them by a strip of wood along the

sides. These were then sanded and painted in the monochrome muted colors that hover on the periphery of symbolic association: *Water* (cerulean blue), *Fire* (salmon red), *Bridge* (chromatic orange), *Hill* (medium gray), *Flower* (light pink) and *Fountain* (very pale gray). These works have been referred to as "ideograms"[3] or "pictographs"[4] because they seem to be quasi-symbolic, shorthand references to real images or experiences. These works, and *The Twenty-Six Series* or "tin alphabet" of 1967, were made to be exhibited on the wall or floor.

Immediately after *The Twenty-Six Series,* Tuttle made a group of ten cloth octagonals, dyed in mute, offbeat pastels. These 1967 octagonals, like the preceding pieces, could be installed either on the wall or floor, the question of whether they were paintings or sculpture becoming irrelevant. Dyed and wrinkled, they are stored crumpled in a canvas bag and installed with small nails, therefore negating their potential objecthood. Tuttle called the cloth octagonals "drawings for three dimensional structures in space."[5] They were followed by twelve white paper octagonals (1970), each cut from a pattern and glued directly onto the wall. These paper works are perceptually so elusive that it is often difficult to see the pieces or, when one does, to determine whether the paper constitutes a light form on the darker ground of the wall or vice versa. The light changes the pieces as much as the pieces alter the light around (or on) them, but they are as much like shadows, defined by their delicate edges, as they are like volumes of light.

Just after the *11th Paper Octagonal,* Tuttle executed nine wall paintings derived from it. These were highly chromatic, geometric paintings, based on unit measurements, so that the scale of the paintings could be changeable as long as the relationships within each painting remained measurably constant. The red *9th Painting for the Wall* (1970) in the first installation, for instance, was visually as elusive as the paper octagonals. Because it was executed on the two right-angled edges of a partition wall, it became optically fused with the shadow along one side, so that it was mostly only visible up close.

Up to this point, Tuttle's work was clearly tending toward dematerialization, becoming more ephemeral as it became more a part of the wall or ground plane on which it was situated. This linear development of the work, however, changed from 1970 on, since the wire pieces done off and on between 1971 and 1974 once again moved away from the wall, establishing a more specific, less isolated dialogue between those elements of volume, line, surface and shadow that Tuttle had been involved with previously. The wire pieces are of three kinds. Some, like the *3rd Wire Octagonal* (1971) or *6th Wire Bridge* (1971), are drawings done with thin wire. They are executed by placing nails in the wall according to a brown paper pattern on which their location is marked, then loosely stretching the wire from nail to nail. Others are done by drawing the wire between two graphite lines and cutting it at the center (*35th Wire Piece* [1972], first installation). Still others are done by drawing a line from one point to another (usually as large as the arms can span), hammering small nails in at the beginning and end of the lines, then tracing the wire along the graphite lines, bending it to conform to the linear shape. The wire is attached at both ends and then released, causing it to spring out from the wall. The freed wire casts a shadow, which forms the third element in the triad of mark, substance and shadow.

Tuttle's subsequent series of works alternate between two and three dimensions in various ways. The 1973 string "drawings" on the floor, entitled *Ten Kinds of Memory and Memory Itself,* are barely three-dimensional, since string is such a linear material. Nonetheless, the drawings are executed according to a specific movement pattern, which can be repeated in order to reexecute the piece. The movements involve sitting, standing, stretching, kneeling, etc., as the string is drawn, thrown or placed as a result of each movement. Although *Ten Kinds of Memory and Memory Itself* is the most linear and two-dimensional of Tuttle's sculptural pieces, it was created in a state of transition between two and three dimensions because its execution involves a choreographed enactment in time and space.

Similarly, the homasote Placks Tuttle did in 1973, flat, white, mute pieces of wallboard hung below eye level, were non-volumetric. They were, literally, a piece of wall on a wall, exploring how a flat surface can be part of a three-dimensional volume that is a room. The Blocks, of the same year, are unmistakably sculptural, sitting as they do on the floor a specifically measured distance out from the wall; they are actually lengths of two-by-four, painted white, each containing an abstract, highly colored image which goes around the block rather than appearing on only one surface. Consequently, these pieces resemble the red *9th Painting for the Wall* in that a painted image is used to both deny and verify a volumetric, sculptural form.

Tuttle has also done ten rope pieces (1973), made of various lengths of ordinary wash cord, cut and slightly frayed at the ends and secured to the wall at precisely measured points relative to eye level (or derived from a five-foot center point). They are startling because, seen from a distance, they are powerfully present in the room despite their very small size (the *3rd Rope Piece,* in the first installation, is only three inches long). What happens in viewing them is that the rope loses its substance and the shadow just underneath it becomes a stronger visual presence than the piece itself. The rope isolates the wall rather than vice versa, playing a peculiar trick of figure-ground reversal with its environment as well as with itself.

The wooden slat "markers" of the same year are cut from quarter-inch plywood, approximately three feet high. Generally, the pieces are long rectangles, angled up at the top end. They are placed flush with the wall and, with two exceptions, begin perpendicular to the floor; on part of each piece, the edges are painted white. Where this white edge exists, it throws a kind of obverse shadow onto the wall, that is, a shadow-edge of reflected, bright light. (One of the pieces is painted white only along a two-inch bottom segment of one side, giving it an aura of mystery and hermeticism, a secret to be discovered upon close observation.) In many of Tuttle's works, most especially in *Ten Kinds of Memory and Memory Itself,* if one length of string crosses another properly, an area of brightness or intensity is created which Tuttle considers an important element in his pieces. In addition to the reversal of light and shadow caused by the edge reflection in the slats, the works themselves occupy space in such a way as to again reverse the expected figure-ground configuration, but in a different way from the expected substance/shadow interplay of the rope pieces. The plywood markers seem to literally cut through planar space so that the wall seems to be split or torn open to reveal the plywood. Each marker is located in the middle of a wall, and it is essential for it to be isolated and centered in order to activate the space. Tuttle's ability to force the environment into the service of the work is necessitated by the work itself, rather than by any arbitrary desire on Tuttle's part to take up a lot of room. After several attempts, all unsuccessful, to situate more than one piece on a wall (even a very large one) for the exhibition, curatorial prudence capitulated to the stubborn demand of the work itself. (This, incidentally, is not the case with the paper octagonals, which can be installed either singly or, as in the second installation, together on a wall, each bisected in this instance by a ridge where the four-foot partitions joined each other, nor is it true of the cloth octagonals.)

That Tuttle's work draws attention to the architectural peculiarities of any space in which it is situated has been noted as both a positive and negative aspect of the work. Especially in his 1973 exhibition at The Clocktower, where all twelve paper octagonals were shown, the peculiarities of the space were very noticeable because of the high degree of perceptual acuity required to locate the octagonals. One critic remarked that, perceptually, the plywood pieces changed when seen singly from when seen in a group:

> Though the individual pieces are deliberately unostentatious in scale, they take on environmental

proportions when viewed as a group. For then they seem to play off one another, appropriating the room itself as their arena; the white walls perform as both positive and negative elements.[6]

A journalist, on the other hand, complained, in reviewing the Whitney exhibition:

> The trouble with Tuttle's art is that it is situational; that is, overly dependent upon its setting for its effect. Like the plywood slats that are "straked" into the floor against a wall, the works merely accent the given space. The pieces relinquish so much of their formal autonomy that they succeed only in becoming a perverse type of interior decoration.[7]

The slats and the paper octagonals are the pieces which most obviously integrate with the environment, but in fact all Tuttle's works have this effect; no matter how idiosyncratic the space, the room or setting for the pieces becomes a specific framework without which the pieces cannot function. This is because a work makes constant reference to what is outside itself—to us the viewers, to the space which houses it, to a state of being which it is both part of and reflects. The work, in other words, is not self-referential but operates as a language, in dialogue with the world which brought it into being and to which it eventually must speak.

This is true of works which are not as closely integrated with the environment as the slat pieces but appear to be self-contained objects clearly differentiated from their surroundings. The four Summer Wood Pieces (1974) are squat, bulky, peculiar-looking objects that do not appear to fit into a categorical analysis of Tuttle's work. They look like small pieces of furniture hung on the wall, although their function is completely obscured and their forms do not resemble anything at all. Their facture is rough and ungainly, and they are more volumetric than any of the other works in the exhibition. They are most closely related to several works done for a 1971 exhibition at the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts in Texas where Tuttle executed four large, freestanding plywood sculptures: *Cube, Slope, The Rise* and *Double Direction.* These in turn related to the earliest 1964 paper cubes in their concerns. Tuttle said specifically of the Dallas sculptures, which like the gallery walls were constructed of Ply-Veneer, that he had the idea of "getting the wall material away from its two-dimensional covering function" and "making it do three-dimensional work."[8] This concept relates to the Plack pieces of 1973 in which homasote, a building material, acts as a relief sculpture on a wall.

Another series done in 1973, the colored triangles, are planar, brightly hued and akin to the plywood markers in that they originate on the ground plane flush against a wall. *1st Colored Triangle* is red, yellow and blue (top to bottom) and *2nd Colored Triangle* is green and blue. They are surprisingly different in their spatial effect, the former "lighting up" or occupying a great deal of visual space, the latter two-colored triangle performing a figure-ground alteration similar to that of the plywood markers, although in a more heavily weighted way. The gravitational pull of these two works, as well as others which seem to propel themselves slowly into the ground rather than spring out of it, hint at the primary concern of the relationship of the human body to Tuttle's work.

The three most recent groups of work, done during the past year, continue earlier investigations perhaps in a more obdurate way. The ten Houston Works, done for an exhibition at the Cusack Gallery in September 1975, are the smallest pieces Tuttle has done to date, but the proportion of size to thickness of material and to color saturation makes them analogous to the 1973 Placks. The Houston Works are made from the rounded ends of coffee stirrers, colored with felt-tip pen (although one, the *8th Houston Work*, in the second installation, was covered with a pale lavender paper because it was impossible to find a felt-tip pen in this particular color). The most perceptually elusive of these, the ninth in the series (third installation), has two green lines along either side; when isolated on a wall, as it was in the Whitney

Prong, 21, 2024. Wood, latex paint, felt, glittered fabric, nails. 34½" × 31½" × 2¼"

Prong, 22, 2024. Wood, enamel paint, plastic, insulation material, aluminum foil, wire, rubber hose, staples, nails. 33" × 39" × 4½"

exhibition, it is so small as to often go unnoticed. Tuttle says of these tiny, exquisitely sensitive works that they are "about states of loving," just as the string pieces were about memory. This is perhaps because the most minute differences between each of the Houston Works—changes in color, direction of the curved versus straight edge of the stirrer, the kinds of shadows cast by the pieces, their placement on the wall—become enormously significant in proportion to their tiny size.

The Rome Pieces, also done in 1975, are equally refined in visual terms, that is, they are small and difficult to see because they are composed of paper pasted to the wall, with pencil lines intersecting or underlining them. However the Rome Pieces are more cerebral and analytical, more rigorously diagrammatic in feeling than the lyrical and chromatic Houston Works. They continue Tuttle's concerns with the interplay of substance and shadow. Of the three works in the Whitney show, the *16th* and *14th Rome Pieces* (first and second installations, respectively) have graphite lines drawn on the wall in relation to the pasted paper in such a way as to make the mark and the extraordinarily delicate shadow cast by the thin edge of paper ambiguously interchangeable. In the *16th Rome Piece,* a tiny triangle of pasted white paper has a graphite line drawn just along the lower edge of the triangle. In the *14th Rome Piece,* two vertical, rectangular pieces of white paper are pasted at their outer edges; where they meet in the center a graphite line is drawn but it is barely visible, if at all, through the slight opening where the pieces of paper are not attached. The *3rd Rome Piece* (first installation) differs in that the pencil lines are drawn along four sides of a five-sided paper figure, and when two of them are continued to twice their length, they cross and form an X, suggesting the reiteration of that paper shape on their opposite side. Through precisely measured lines, the ghost of an image is made to appear in the mind's eye; logic dictates the incomplete poetry of the piece. Whereas the graphite line here suggests the substantive aspect of the piece (i.e., the paper), the substance that does not exist on the other side of the work becomes a ghost image or shadow because it is only implied.

The Cincinnati Pieces, done for an exhibition at the Contemporary Arts Center in that city,[9] constitute another mode of exploring this same question of illusion and substance. Cut from two-by-fours painted white, the ends angled, they are hung from a hole drilled in the back of each piece—as were the earlier wood pieces like *Yellow Dancer* or *Ash Wednesday,* both 1965—and tilt according to an exactly calculated gravitational pull which Tuttle duplicates by using a brown paper prototype to determine the placement of the nail on the wall. Each piece is cut at a different angle and situated alone on a wall, tilting at a different angle. Once again, the pale, chalk-white chunky object, whose cast shadow is visually as substantial as the wood itself, becomes mysteriously ephemeral, a "ghost of its former self."

Seen out of context, that is, prior to installation, the Placks, Blocks, Wood Slats, Cincinnati Pieces and even the cloth octagonals (crumpled into a canvas bag) do not look like anything at all. The wire pieces, made from florist's wire uncoiled directly from the spool, and the rope pieces, cut and frayed on the spot, are not even visible as potential art before installation. Rather, Tuttle's works spring into being as though, like actors waiting patiently in the wings, they come to life only as the play commences. Thus, although they are clearly objects when installed, they deny their nature at the same time they confirm it, by being ephemeral and dependent upon the artist and the audience to animate them.

Tuttle's art is, in this sense, one of dematerialization. Even when the works are substantive and bulky, they can be made and disassembled rapidly, and their materials can be easily obtained almost anywhere. Tuttle has thus allowed the value of his work to be shared with its environment rather than with its materials, and with the artist's activity rather than his product. Tuttle talks about how much he enjoys executing his work. Having "the possibility of immortalizing an activity that's right for you (like making the wire pieces) is quite harmless, it's fun; and in a way this is quite exciting."

A summary of what Tuttle's work is—and looks like—leads the viewer to trace a development of increasing dematerialization until the 1970 paper octagonals, and to retrace from that point until the present a continuation of the sense of visual dematerialization without an accompanying decrease in the material itself. That is, Tuttle seems to have explored the extent to which he could render the work ephemeral without depending upon the thickness or thinness of the material for such an effect.

One finds that Tuttle's work has also become increasingly situational, that is, inseparable from the specific time and space in which it is seen. He has also made it clear in his work that, in a period—particularly between 1965 and 1970—when painting and sculpture seemed to polarize and to occupy separate critical arenas, his was an art which was not about its own conventions, but about states of thinking, seeing and feeling—states of being—to which the issue of whether it was painting or sculpture was totally irrelevant.

Several questions concerning the nature of Turtle's art, outside its formal aspects, remain to be answered, and these are questions not of *what* and *how,* but of *why.* The most important aspect of Tuttle's work appears to center on its affective nature, that is, on why work of such apparent simplicity, modesty and casualness is able to create such a strong response. This is not to say that the response to Tuttle's work is always the same but, if the reactions to the Whitney exhibition are typical, they are never ones of indifference. It seems that the response generally centers on the issue of how the work could do so much with so little. The tiny *10th Rope Piece* (second installation), for instance, prompted one observer to remark on its astonishing poignancy and prompted another to steal it. One critic admires Tuttle's ability to "control an enormous expanse of space with the slightest amount of physicality."[10] Another complains that "the spectator soon becomes so sensitized to the lilliputian scale and teeny-weeny subtleties of Tuttle's work that he begins to scrutinize ordinary hairline cracks in the wall."[11] It is clear that Tuttle's work, in order to be seen at all, focuses the viewer's attention in a particular way, forcing a concentration that alters one's vision not only of the pieces, but of everything around them as well, even to the extent of compelling one to pay attention to the very act of paying attention.

This phenomenon can perhaps be explained by understanding that, in Tuttle's work, as in the work of most artists who are concerned with anything other than the purely formal aspects of their art, the work is the product of a dialogue between interior and exterior states. This is a classic concept, sometimes seen as a translation of emotional states onto the canvas (as in Abstract Expressionism), as a way of finding pictorial images to represent a narrative situation, or as a system of visual equivalences for spoken language. The artist does not, even in a painting of the most realistic, photographic image, consider that internal and external events are exactly the same; one's attitude about an object, for example, can alter the way one sees the object.

In the translation of internal events to external events, we assume that the two are different, that while external events have a physicality to them, to be accommodated internally they must "lack at least the physicality of their external counterparts."[12] Because much of the peculiarity of Tuttle's work lies in the fact that it is not only physically insubstantial, but that the objects he makes do not, as is his intention, resemble anything but themselves, we are led to assume—indeed, to feel distinctly—that he is interested in the expression of interior states rather in a reexamination of the physical world. This quality is responsible for the metaphysical, poetic, transcendent feeling occasioned by the presence of Tuttle's work, just as it is also responsible for its "quietude" or unobtrusiveness. This gentle silence is unnerving because it demands a great deal from the observer; time, patience, care, attention to detail, a slow search for meaning, for clarity. The work comes into focus slowly and cannot be grasped—or sometimes even seen—all at once or easily, so that its value as entertainment is negligible.

Tuttle's work, in other words, does not resemble things in the world because he is exploring the presence of nonphysical states in himself. Examples of such nonphysical things, which are part of interior states, are the mental categories of time and space, beginning and end, part and whole, singular and plural, equal and different, cause and effect; also, the category of number, and other nonspecific mental categories that are necessary but not sufficient aspects of works of art, like line, point, area or volume.[13] These "pure" mental categories do not directly affect or change the observable qualities of things; that is, if we choose to see the *top* of Tuttle's *First Green Octagonal* (1967) as its beginning, or the *bottom* as its beginning, this will affect how we see the piece but will not change the work's actual color, material, shape, size or proportions. That Tuttle is concerned with pure mental categories becomes clear when watching him install the cloth octagonals, because he pays no attention whatsoever to how they are hung; the same piece, hung on a loosely vertical axis on the wall in the first installation, was shown lying on the floor in the second, and on the wall again, horizontally on the diagonal, in the third installation. Similarly, whether one of the forty-eight wire pieces is seen as a whole piece or part of a series does not affect its observable physical properties, but rather conceptually enriches its simple and straightforward appearance. The limitations of formal description in dealing critically with Tuttle's work have been noted by several astute critics of his work. Carter Ratcliff commented that "Tuttle arranges it so that there is no end to a formal description of his new works nor any sense that such a description would lead far if elaborated."[14] Susan Heinemann, similarly, noted that

> a physical description of Richard Tuttle's new work seems totally inadequate to the occasion. One does not see Tuttle's pieces as self-contained objects, as hermetic repositories of meaning. In fact, one doesn't merely "see" Tuttle's works; one experiences them through one's body. . . . Tuttle's pieces are more like markers, indices by which one measures rather than enacts one's situational space, one's being in the world.[15]

Much of Tuttle's work is a translation into objects of interior states which have no physical analogue, and because as art objects they are so unfamiliar to us, they exist only when we pay attention to them. In fact, Selvio Ceccato notes:

> It is obvious that nothing could be mentally "present" for us without the intervention of attention. . . . For the constitution of every mental construct, that is of every possible content of thought and of thought itself, the essential activity is that which we call attentional.[16]

Interestingly, Ceccato points out that attention can be applied by the mind only to the functioning of other organs—the ear, the hand, the mouth, the nose and, especially relevant here, the eyes—for "discrete intervals of time, ranging from a tenth of a second to a second and a half." If one tries to prolong it, the attempt produces a hypnotic state in which the "hold" of the attention is dulled.[17] Thus, the semihypnotic quality caused by looking attentively and continuously at a Tuttle work may be responsible in part for the experience of the work being described as a "meditative" one.

It is the memory, however, that serves to link moments of pure attention together. Attention is also directed not only on the act of "seeing" the piece, but on the mental categories previously mentioned (i.e., space, time, beginning, end, part, whole, etc.), as well as on the effect of the whole. Thus attention is not isolated or fragmented but constitutes a part of a changing series of relationships between physical and "psychical" observation, that is, feeling, focusing, thinking, reacting, etc.

Physical observation is observation localized in space; "psychical" observation is localized in time.

Prong, 23, 2024. Enamel paint, wood, marker, aluminum, nails. 27" × 25½" × 3"

Prong, 24, 2024. Wood, wood stain, acrylic paint, graphite, colored pencil, paper, nails. 21½" × 21½" × 4½"

> Thus physical and psychical things always arise in pairs; furthermore, the physical thing will always be situated in a given place, separate from and adjoining another physical thing in another place, and the psychical thing will always be situated at a given moment in time, separate from another psychical thing at another moment.[18]

This observation about the nature of "things" (which are the simplest categorical constructs) may help to explain why Tuttle's work requires so much space and time in order to be apprehendable in a clear way.

Tuttle's work is perceptually elusive because he seems to have created pieces that exist in moments of change. For example, the paper octagonals could be said to vacillate between states of being because, on their simplest level, they can be seen as light on dark or vice versa depending not only on the time of day, but on the direction from which they are viewed. More intricately, Tuttle

> sets simplicity against complexity. This (perceptual) tension is at the edges of his paper objects and leaves them physically, formally, blank and no more; they are not, for example, blank squares or blank circles. When one feels this tension, one's feelings for the work can begin; one can sense the constants which lie beneath our perceptions of absence and presence (our perceptions of possibility). One could characterize presence as extreme complexity and absence as extreme simplicity. Tuttle's new works bring one to an understanding that these characterizations are interchangeable. This is a felt understanding which has the power to dissociate blankness from emptiness.[19]

Similarly, the wire pieces are trapped in the process of change; the coiled wire, tracing a drawn line, retains a ghost of its original form as it is released from the wall. It is as though the memory of its own history had been incorporated into the piece at the moment of its transformation into another state.

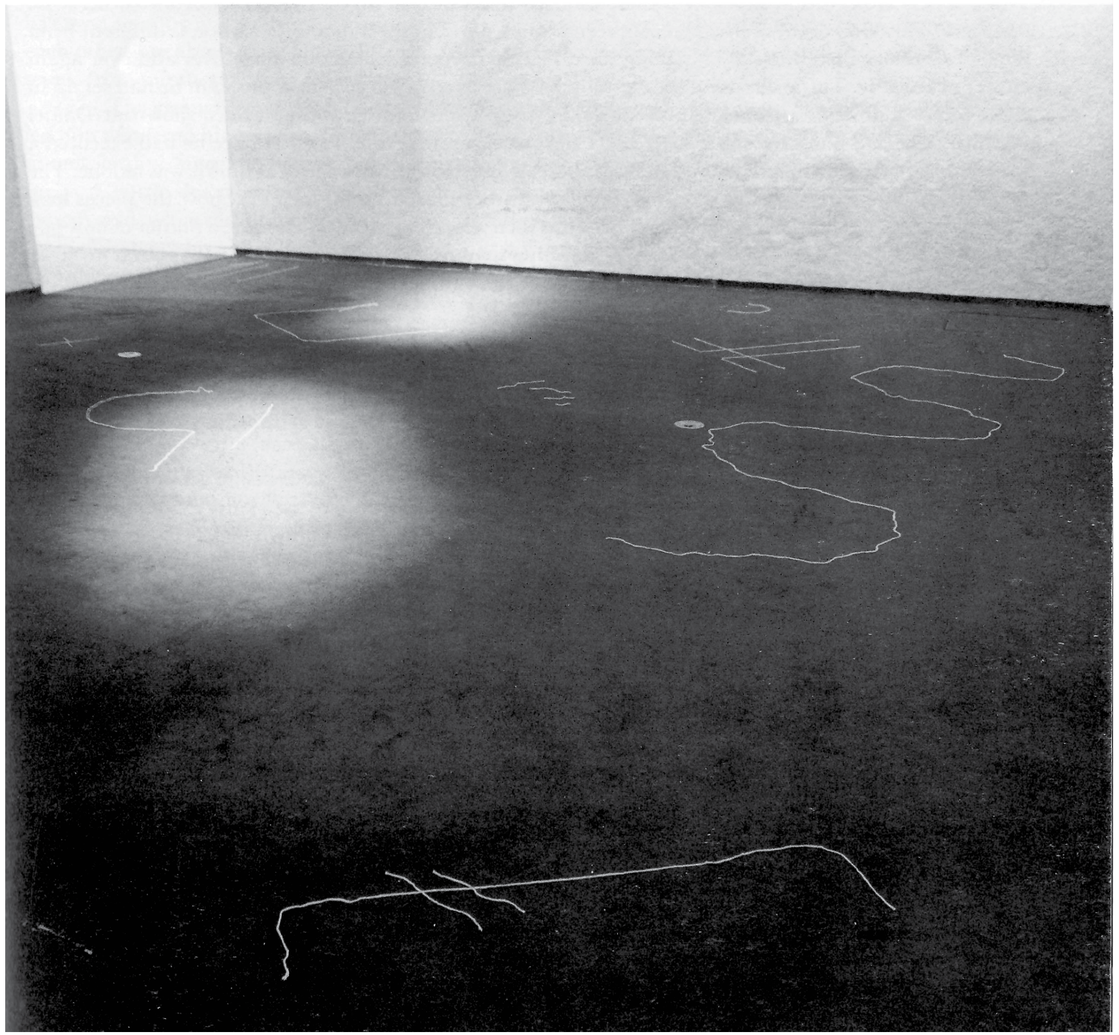
Because memory serves as a bridge between periods of attention and states of change, it is an important aspect of Tuttle's work, both intentional and not. Some of the key functions of memory relevant to Tuttle's work are those of

> literal recall (which makes it possible to have present again the operation already performed without modifying it) and summarized recall (which makes it possible to have present again the operation already performed in abbreviated, condensed form). . . .[20]

In *Ten Kinds of Memory and Memory Itself,* a group of eleven string pieces or "drawings" on the floor, Tuttle has choreographed each piece so that the work can be recreated by repeating the movement patterns which dictate how the string is to be placed on the floor. Each group of movements, resulting in a single piece, is predicated upon the dimensions of the body, so that Tuttle might begin, for instance, by crouching with the ball of string in his right hand, then bringing it around behind him, transferring it to the other hand, then cutting the string off at a point just parallel to where the movement began. Other works are made by cutting a piece of string approximately one-third as large as the span between the artist's hands, held at shoulder width, then throwing the piece in a loosely curvilinear fashion to one side, cutting a slightly smaller piece and throwing that next to the first, and so on. In other pieces, string is laid out so that one strand lies on top of another; then their positions are reversed by the top string's being carefully threaded underneath.

In October 1975, Tuttle and nine others, myself among them, experimented with executing the string pieces by following his "choreography" exactly. Although the works we executed differed in size and in quality, those that were best were clearly those that were least self-conscious, least regular and whose lines had the most "character," in addition to the correct proportions. We found it extremely

First installation view. *Ten Kinds of Memory and Memory Itself.* 1973. String; most pieces fit into the area of a 36″ circle. Courtesy of Daniel Weinberg Gallery, San Francisco, and Galerie Yvon Lambert, Paris.



difficult to achieve the intense, nervous, but quiet feeling of Tuttle's own string drawings. Our pieces were like body pictographs resulting in handwriting of a very personal nature that involved more than just the arm and hand. We also found that the pieces that were visually the simplest were often the most difficult to execute, and that the visual "weight" and "brightness" created in the interstices where the strings crossed each other were not only possible to see when attention was focused on them, but were also essential to the success of the pieces.

The simplest, rounded semicircle (the "memory itself" of the work's title) was, according to Tuttle, taken from the memory of a dimension (the distance between two parts) of an earlier wire sculpture. This kind of summarized recall, recreating a partial aspect of another work, is different from the literal recall called into use in making the other ten parts, which can be made over and over again almost identically. Tuttle discussed the eleven-part piece as a way of solving a problem he had set up in some wire sculptures not seen in this exhibition; they are a large group of works, shown at Daniel Weinberg Gallery, San Francisco, in 1973. The problem, as he saw it, was that once he had executed a wire sculpture, he remembered how it looked, and this affected the work the next time it was redone. The string pieces are about a gestural or body memory rather than a visual memory; how the pieces look when done does not affect them when redone. Thus their "correct" execution is more a matter of how one feels while they are being made. In the wire/graphite/shadow works, however, Tuttle says that he "tries to get into an area where memory is disposable. I try to execute them as though for the first time, every time."

The making of each piece is involved with the ambiguity of things caught in a state of change, and with change itself—in the arbitrary directional placement of the pieces, in the perceptual shifts occasioned by some of the works, reenactment or re-creation, and in their situational flexibility. Change cannot be considered apart from the temporal dimension because change is transition and transition is movement in time as well as space.

Much of Tuttle's work also has to do with gesture, that is, the piece as the result of a gestural process. Even where this is not so, however, as in *The Twenty-Six Series* where each letter exists as an object, the pieces are arranged gesturally, as though they had been randomly "thrown" up onto the wall. It is also interesting to note that most of the pieces in the series suggest letters of the alphabet that are in varying stages of physical distortion or transformation. Watching Tuttle install *The Twenty-Six Series* on the floor of the Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney Galleries (third installation) was instructive. He flung them onto the floor, and after they had all been scattered, he further upset any intentional order or "artfulness" in their arrangement by running around the gallery gently kicking the pieces into a haphazard configuration; thus their ultimate placement is a result of movement.

In the wire/graphite/shadow drawings especially, the execution and placement of the pieces is not only the result of temporary gesture, but is temporal in feeling as well. The fleeting, elusive quality of Tuttle's work, its visual "pace," is particularly apparent in the *6th Wire Bridge,* 1971 (first installation), where the three pieces of wire act as visual velocities. Time can only be plotted as length, and relative time (i.e., shorter, longer, faster, slower) is measurable by succession. This work places three wire lines of increasing lengths loosely parallel to each other on the wall. Because the change from one line to another is so readily apparent in juxtaposition, it becomes clear that the temporality of the piece lies in an area between

> the antipodes of the human experience of time, (i.e.) exact repetition, which is onerous, and unfettered variation, which is chaotic. . . . Inventions, which are commonly thought to mark great leaps in

Prong, 26, 2024. Brown paper, plastic, metal, rubber tubing, wire, wood, nails. 66½" × 41½" × 2½"

Prong, 10, 2024. Wood, spray paint, moulding, rubber tubing, wire mesh, wire, nails. 54½" × 48" × 10½"

development and to be extremely rare occurrences, are actually one with the humble substance of everyday behavior, whereby we exercise the freedom to vary our actions a little.[21]

Most of Tuttle's works exist in groups or in open-ended series, in which each of the works varies subtly—and sometimes blatantly—from the others; moreover, each group grows out of one or more works of another series. This is why grouping a cloth octagonal, a paper octagonal and a wire octagonal together (first installation), or a rope piece, a painted wooden work, a Block and a Plack (third installation), is a more accurate way of seeing Tuttle's work than in a homogeneous installation. Tuttle has used various materials toward similar ends, whereas certain of the wire pieces, when compared to each other, are about completely different issues and are often more closely related to pieces in another series, from another period of his career.

The gestural quality of Tuttle's work and the swiftness and simplicity of execution which have led him to refer to himself as a "hit and run artist" are aspects of the work's relation to the body as well as to temporality, since the body is our primary metaphor and vehicle for being-in-the-world.

Tuttle describes his work, from time to time, in these terms, seeing the octagonals as being "about skin, while the alphabet, the Cincinnati Pieces, and the rope and wire pieces too are about bone." One could take this analogy one step further and say that the wall paintings might be about blood, thus completing the cycle of the body as object, as producer, and as container. In a less metaphoric sense, the paper and cloth octagonals function as covering membranes, whereas the more substantive pieces are structural in nature and suggest a skeletal support rather than a surface. The "skeletal" pieces are, interestingly, the most hermetic, appearing to have been uncovered or exposed inadvertently, and it is perhaps this quality that endows them at their best with such animate qualities as poignancy or tenderness, without any accompanying anthropomorphism in the form of the work itself.

Moreover, the sense of gravity, of body orientation, is marked in Tuttle's work. The plywood Slats, for example, are distinctly vertical, aligned on the same plane as the standing human body, yet do not become a metaphor for that body. Similarly, the Blocks, placed on the floor, have an astonishing gravitational pull, and create an Alice-in-Wonderland sensation of our own miniaturization and/or aggrandizement in their viewing. Even the wire pieces, as Tuttle himself indicates, are subject to gravity. "They got longer and longer and seemed to want to touch the floor. They don't, but if they *did* touch, the place where they met the floor would have the kind of brightness or intensity of the string works, where the pieces crossed."

Body awareness is heightened not only by the strong sense of gravity in these pieces, but by a focus on equilibrium that is especially apparent in the drawings; most of them are concerned with issues of motion, balance, potential and actual displacement, or (like the wire drawings) the act of exploration which the body—especially the hand as a primary instrument of touch—is engaged in.

In the large pieces, which are so dependent upon measurement for their execution, each measurement is taken from the proportions of Tuttle's own body; the string works are dictated by the span of his arms or the width of his torso. The Rome Pieces and rope works—in fact, most of the wall pieces in general—are situated at eye level or at a specified distance relative to eye level. Balance is similarly an intrinsic aspect of the body, balancing upright against gravity, for instance, or using the arms, extended, to assess different weights and tensions; the third installation seemed to be especially about this kind of balance.[22]

In the installation of the cloth octagonals, the tin alphabet, the wire drawings and the string pieces, Tuttle readies himself as a dancer would for the activity of making the work present to himself and to us. That so much of Tuttle's work is a result of body activity is partly caused by the fact that

physical activity is the most direct and common means we have of translating interior states into external expression; in a very direct way, frowning, smiling, closed or open body positions, etc., are our primary communicative means, because they are experientially rather than analytically comprehensible. Our own experience of our bodies is "pre-scientific," primitive and immediate.[23]

In the mimeographed handout I wrote for distribution during the Tuttle show, I indicated that the work is "felt" rather than "understood," a statement which was criticized as being equally true of other art as well. Certainly feeling and understanding cannot be separated entirely from each other, but there are certain works which require thought in order to be accessible and others which require experience, and these are not necessarily the same. This distinction is in a sense the basis for dealing with the pure conceptual art of Kosuth, for instance, as opposed to the sensuous, ephemeral and unanalytic work of a painter like Agnes Martin. In examining how thought itself is constituted, differentiating between *thinking* and *perceiving* is instructive; the former involves the construction of an ordered world of objects, exact and stable but clumsily bureaucratic as well, whereas perception is quicker and more flexible, spontaneously ingenious, but less reliable and more uncertain. Moreover, thought has to be abstract, ordered into categories at the expense of finer shades of meaning. Thought involves measurement and exactitude, whereas perception is more fleeting.

> Some objects can only be attained through thought, as for instance all the pure constructs of science. These objects are not to be experienced. Their purpose is to form a basis for thinking. Other object-complexes on the contrary, *are not accessible to thought,* because they fall apart during analysis, and have to be experienced directly.[24]

The distinctions between description and expression, thinking and perceiving, analyzing and experiencing are classic ones; Tuttle's work is based upon the former categories of each pair in its conception, while its execution and effect are concerned with the latter.

The intensity of feeling in the experience of Tuttle's work, as opposed to a precise logical understanding of it, is partly responsible for the critical description of the work as childlike and/or primitive. Tuttle himself once wrote, "I would really like to be ignorant."[25]

This statement can be understood in several ways, but the possibility of making art which is, in Tuttle's words, "purely motivated," that is, a direct translation of internal states, is one valid interpretation. Another interpretation may be linked to Tuttle's insistence on "investigation" in his work, so that the hand, for instance, does not translate what it already knows onto the wall, but discovers what it knows in the moment of execution. In this way, each piece can be remade as if for the first time. Similarly, three near-identical drawings will seem entirely different, microscopic adjustments becoming apparent to the viewer not in a visually measurable way, but by means of a perceptual and emotional (i.e., experiential) shift; thus none of the three "identical" drawings are, in fact, the same.

The act of seeking, of investigation, causes a tremulous, tentative, vulnerable line to emerge from the gesture of the hand and arm; this childlike quality in the line is characteristic of Tuttle's graphic work. Moreover, the self-referential quality of Tuttle's work, its simplicity in terms of "thingness," resembles those forms made by children at an early stage in the development of their ability to "represent."

> The first drawn "rounding" surely results from the movements of the hand and the arm. . . . For the child, "thingness" is perfectly represented by the rounding, because the child primarily intends the general enclosed character of things. The circle not only represents this quality because of its concentrated shape, but also because the surface inside a contour seems more dense than its surroundings.[26]

The density of Tuttle's configurations, especially the early wooden ones, their mat building-block color,

their casualness and simplicity of facture, their tactility are responsible for the innocent, childlike quality they afford; nothing, evidently, could be more enigmatic than simplicity.

Robert Pincus-Witten noted the "infant-like thrust" of the 1964 paper cubes and remarked that the wood reliefs resembled "the elements of a child's fitted jigsaw puzzle—large, squat, simplified shapes."[27] At that point in Tuttle's work—that is, up to and including *The Twenty-Six Series* (1967) or "tin alphabet"—this childlike quality is especially marked. In fact, although the naturalistic, animistic aspects of this work separate it from work which was to follow, these are also aspects of a child's perception of causal relations, according to psychologists. Therefore, for the child, "material objects, living or not, are regarded as having an animal spirit that makes them behave as they do"; similarly, "*'artificialism,'* according to which all events are regulated by some humanlike entity," and *naturalism,* which is "the acceptance of impersonal natural forces as the governing agent in many events"[28] are part of a child's perception of the world until a certain age. The animate quality in Tuttle's early work, the feeling that the pieces are informed by a kind of personality of their own, and Tuttle's own somewhat fatalistic attitude about the work, as though it had a will and life of its own, seem to substantiate the analogy. "I am not responsible for my work," he has said. However, this animism or naturalism does not render the work anthropomorphic; it still does not resemble, as work, anything but itself, although it is informed by a spirit of its own. Even the pictorialism of *Hill, Fire, Fountain, Flower* and other 1965 pieces has more to do with Tuttle's expressed intent, via the titles he gave to the pieces, than with their resemblance to those actual objects or events.

What is childlike is often equated with what is primitive, and in fact the pictographic or ideogrammatic aspect of these pieces resembles hieroglyphics, but not those of Egypt or other classical civilizations. There is, for example, a little-known pictorial symbol-language in use in the eastern provinces of southern Nigeria called *nsibidi,* which differs from hieroglyphics in that it contains no trace of an alphabet.[29] The linear signs resemble the shapes found in Tuttle's work, especially the drawings and the wire pieces. Other aspects of *nsibidi* resemble Tuttle's work, for instance the fact that there is no order of writing, that a sign may be horizontal, vertical or oblique according to the preference of the writer, that the same thing can be expressed by different signs (so that many acts or states of mind are represented by one sign representing men, for instance), or even that the same sign can stand for different things. The interest here lies not in any direct connection between this primitive language and Tuttle's configurations, but in the quality of the pictorial language which, in its directness, simplicity, and interchangeable aspects is analogous to Tuttle's use of forms in series and groupings.[30] This is perhaps another reason why, each time a piece is remade by Tuttle in a different context or environment, its meaning alters slightly, and it becomes, in effect, a new piece.

Language of any kind, of course, is a system of symbols and the language of visual arts is an especially complex symbol-system. For the most part, verbal and written language has been the main subject matter of semiotics (i.e., a language used to talk about signs, and to understand the rules for the use of signs), but investigation into other aspects of signs, such as diagrams and pictorial images, has become intensified in recent years.[31] One purpose of signs is "to describe experiences or objects";[32] if we consider the ephemeral objects created by Tuttle to be visual signs this reinforces the idea of their facture as the result of a translation of interior states to exterior ones.

One reason, perhaps, for the attendant confusion about Tuttle's work has to do with the fact that the use of signs involves a system of expectations. According to information theory, if our expectation about a sign is completely accurate, we don't get any new information from it because we know in advance what is going to happen. On the other hand, if the sign has no probability at all, the message becomes meaningless. The "value" of a work of art, therefore, depends on a balance in the

degree of new as opposed to old information provided; it must be familiar enough to be recognized as a work of art, but not so familiar as to be mundane and therefore indistinguishable from the objects of everyday experience.

Although an appreciation of Tuttle's work depends upon a kind of perceptual acuity, and requires us to focus our attention on the *act* of seeing, as well as on *what* we are seeing, the results of this visual alteration are startling and often moving.

Looking at Tuttle's work is like reading a friend's diary; the work is full of secrets hidden among the facts. There are encounters with known and unknown aspects of another personality, glimpses of a shared world seen through another's eyes, moments of humor, wit and irony, intentional and not. One feels, looking at Tuttle's work, that we have stumbled onto a private place. Some of the visual events in this place are strange and eccentric, some are sensuous, and some are too hermetic to be understood. There is always, in the work, a sense of integrity in the translation of interior states of being to exterior events; Tuttle is not afraid to contradict himself, to be vulnerable, or occasionally to fail. What is most beautiful and moving about Tuttle's work is that moment when, in dialogue with it, we are able to recognize ourselves.

Marcia Tucker

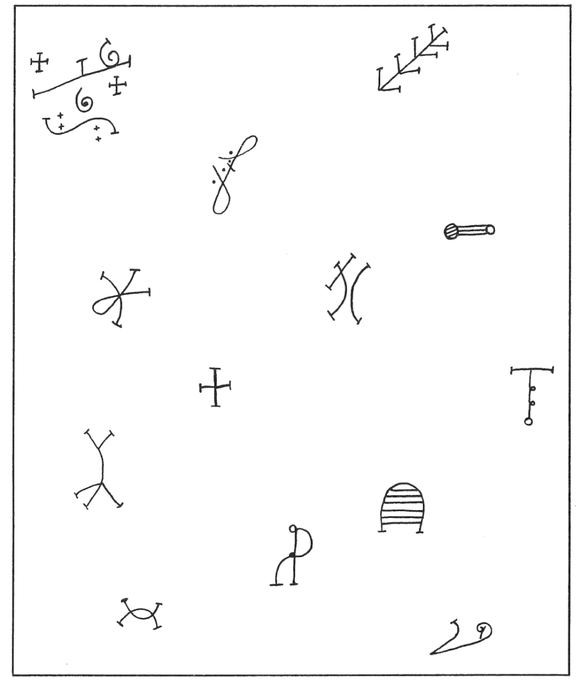
Footnotes

1. All quotes, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from conversations with the author in the summer and fall of 1975.
2. Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Intentions in Architecture*, (Cambridge, Mass.: The M.I.T. Press, 1965), p. 72.
3. Robert Pincus-Witten, "The Art of Richard Tuttle," *Artforum*, vol. 8 (February 1970), p. 65.
4. Robert M. Murdock, Introduction, *Richard Tuttle* (Dallas: Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, 1971), n.p.
5. Dorothy Alexander, "Conversations with the Work and the Artist," *Mel Bochner, Barry Le Va, Dorothea Rockburne, Richard Tuttle* (Cincinnati: Contemporary Arts Center, 1975), p. 42.
6. Nancy Foote in "Review of Exhibitions," *Art in America*, vol. 62 (May/June 1974), p. 102.
7. David Bourdon, "Playing Hide and Seek in the Whitney," *The Village Voice*, vol. 20 (September 29, 1975), p. 97.
8. Quoted in Murdock, *Richard Tuttle*, n.p.
9. "Mel Bochner, Barry Le Va, Dorothea Rockburne, Richard Tuttle," Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, Ohio, January 8–February 16, 1975.
10. John Perreault, "Tuttle's Subtle Output," *Soho Weekly News*, September 18, 1975, p. 22.
11. Bourdon, "Playing Hide and Seek in the Whitney," p. 97.
12. Selvio Ceccato, "The Mind, Thought and Language," *Science and Literature: New Lenses for Criticism*, Edward M. Jennings, ed. (New York: Anchor Books, 1970), p. 107.
13. Ibid., p. 114.
14. Carter Ratcliff in "New York Letter," *Art International*, vol. 14 (May 20, 1970), p. 76.
15. Susan Heinemann in "Reviews," *Artforum*, vol. 12 (June 1974), p. 75.
16. Ceccato, "The Mind, Thought and Language," p. 112.
17. Ibid., p. 113.
18. Ibid., pp. 119–20.
19. Carter Ratcliff in "New York Letter," *Art International*, vol. 14 (May 20, 1970), p. 76.
20. Ceccato, "The Mind, Thought and Language," p. 120.
21. George Kubler, *The Shape of Time* (New Haven, Conn., and London: Yale University Press, 1962), p. 63.
22. Donald G. Macrae, "The Body and Social Metaphor," *The Body as a Medium of Expression*, Jonathan Benthall and Ted Polhemus, ed. (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1975), p. 61.
23. Ibid., p. 67.
24. Norberg-Schulz, *Intentions in Architecture*, p. 62.
25. Hermann Kern, *Richard Tuttle: Das 11. Papierachteck und Wandmalerein [Richard Tuttle: The 11th Paper Octagonal and Paintings for the Wall]*, (Munich: Kunstraum, 1973), p. 8.
26. Norberg-Schulz, *Intentions in Architecture*, p. 76.
27. Robert Pincus-Witten, "The Art of Richard Tuttle," *Arforum*, vol. 8 (February 1970), p. 65.
28. L. Joseph Stone and Joseph Church, *Childhood and Adolescence* (New York: Random House, 1957), p. 185.
29. Rev. J.K. Macgregor, B.D., "Some Notes on Nsibidi," *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*, vol. 39 (1909), pp. 209–19.
30. Incidentally, the word *nsibidi* comes from the Ibo word *sibidi*, which means to play; to play has, according to Macgregor, a wider use in the native language than in English.

    > It stands for all the shades of meaning from sport to drama. Because the dramas, as we may call the native dances, are religious, it has also a sense of to bewitch. Because the beat of the heart is regular as the beat of the drum, it is also applied to the beating of the heart. (Macgregor, "Some Notes on Nsibidi," p. 210.)

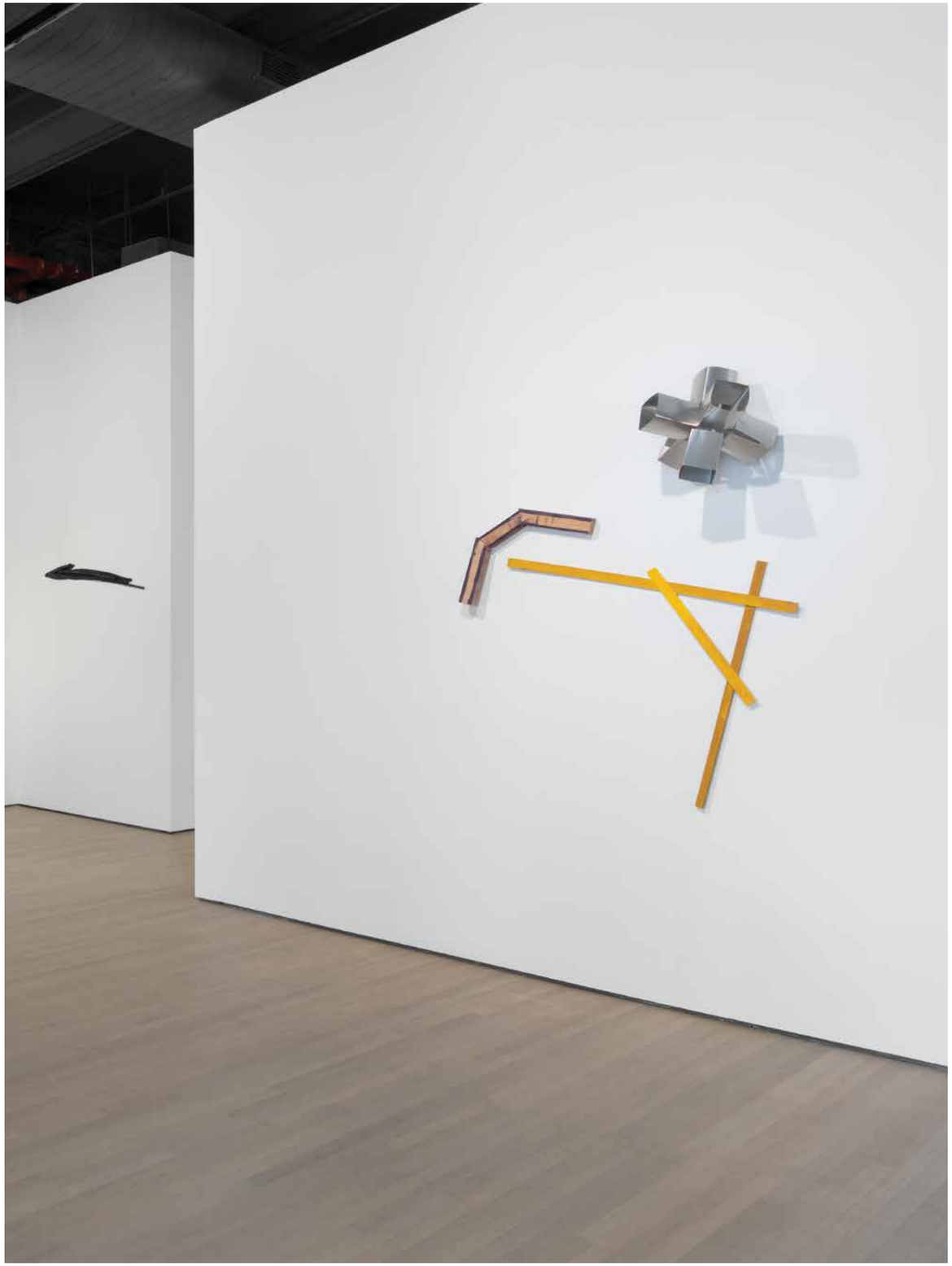
31. Norberg-Schulz, *Intentions in Architecture*, p. 60.
32. Ibid.

I do not wish to carry the analogy too far but only to point out that the playful, witty or ironic quality in Tuttle's work, and especially in the 1964–67 pieces, has to do with the fact that the works like *The Twenty-Six Series* can be arranged at whim and in any location or direction, i.e., horizontal or vertical, on the floor or walls. Similarly, the physical aspects of Tuttle's works, their existence and placement as a result of gesture, or their re-creation (as in the string pieces) by means of an elaborate choreography, share the aspect of dance/drama/sign with that of the primitive pictographic language. My thanks to Betty Collings, Director of the Gallery at Ohio State University, for having brought Macgregor's article to my attention.



...d various *nsibidi* figures by Katherine Sokolnikoff from ...m Rev. J.K. Macgregor's article (see fnn. 29 and 30).

Prong, 27, 2024. Wood, metal, wire, acrylic paint, nails. 63" × 48" × 14½"



Installation view: *Richard Tuttle: A Distance From This*, 125 Newbury, September 13–October 26, 2024, New York. Photo: Peter Clough.

RICHARD TUTTLE: TENDER

Oliver Shultz

I encounter the art of Richard Tuttle not so much as something "made" as something delivered. For me, Tuttle is a kind of midwife. He tenders works of art to me. He brings them into my world, inviting me to attend them, to pass time with them. More than a maker of sculpture, Tuttle seems a kind of purveyor of offerings, of delicacies, of subtleties. His exhibition at 125 Newbury is, for me, a meditation on tendering and tenderness.

Tuttle is a magician of sorts, an enchanter of matter. Although drawing has long been at the center of his practice, I find that in his work, distinctions between "sculpture," "painting," and "drawing" stop mattering. His emphatically hybrid objects defy categorization, remaining radically open, infused with possibility.

What does Tuttle's work ask of me? If it asks anything, it does so quietly. It speaks in whispers, yet with enormous authority. It doesn't demand, it tenders invitations. It provides points of entry—openings, however slight or sly—through which I might be afforded a glimpse of revelation, a fragment of strange and mysterious beauty. Tuttle unearths this beauty from the humblest artifacts of everyday life. I rediscover things I thought I knew. Everyday bits of matter become suddenly more present, more alive, I reminded they were there all along, hiding in plain sight.

To be coaxed along into Tuttle's world—to accept this invitation—is to involve myself in a chain of telescoping embraces. The joint where a bent piece of rubber tubing in *Prong, 10* intersects with a diaphanous field of metal mesh becomes, for me, an artifact of sensuous caress. A tentative contour of penciled line in *Prong, 14* is suddenly imbued with heroism and tragedy. The ragged edges of painted wood and the metal in *Prong, 27* form a constellation, a force field that erupts suddenly in ribald celebration of ordinariness. The ordinary becomes a vehicle for the sublime.

Tuttle's art celebrates the fragile and the flawed. It brings awkwardness and tenderness into balance. It traffics in levity yet sustains an almost metaphysical gravitas. Each work in Tuttle's exhibition bears the title *Prong*. A prong may refer to the tines of a fork, or to the individual components of a strategy, an attack, or operation. As a verb, to prong means to pierce or stab. In this body of work, Tuttle fashions tuning forks for eye and mind, fabricating tools for the piercing of perception. Every construction Tuttle conjures is its own *punctum*—it possess some sharp point that mediates between what can be said and what can only be felt.

The more time one spends with its strangeness, the more Tuttle's work coaxes hidden things into visibility. His work emerges from the intertwining of thought and perception, of body and spirit, of the here and the not-here. I want to insist that Tuttle does not invent; he discovers. He douses the earth to uncover wellsprings of what was there all along, revealing this to me as a gift.

Tenderness has to do with touch, with sensitivity, with delicacy. Tuttle's works have all of these things. In the dictionary, one of the many definitions of the word "to tender," as a verb, is to present a thing, often for some kind of acceptance. Tuttle's exhibition at 125 Newbury is just such a presentation. The time I spend with these works—the pieces of my life that I carve out for this—amounts to a form of acceptance.

I am reminded of how the artist Paul Thek once said that the acceptance of our bodies as mere matter—as flesh that will decay and turn to dust, like flower petals—amounts to a form of joy. I realize that I find a similar kind of joy in Tuttle's work.

Time tenders us to dust.

Tuttle's works are tender but never precious. What is the difference between tenderness and preciousness?

A thing which is precious is always precious to *someone*; it has a particular value, you might even say it has an exchange value. And yet Tuttle's works are neither universal nor particular. Like an open letter, they address me cordially, as if I were an emissary of everyone. More interested in valor than value, more suited to use than to exchange, I find that Tuttle's work is offered freely. It is the opposite of "legal" tender. It breaks rules, defies systems, subverts and skirts the law. I find in Tuttle's work an entire philosophy of value, one that frustrates our workaday systems of valuation. These works open a window to the revaluation of what value is. Such revaluation of values is how Karl Marx once defined the essence of revolutionary thought.

Tuttle's objects have been doing the work of revolution since the beginning of his career. In a now mythological scene from the New York art world of the mid-1970s, the curator Marcia Tucker is fired from her job at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Tucker has organized the first institutional exhibition of the work of Richard Tuttle, only to encounter a critical reception so terrible, so passionately and bombastically negative, that she loses her job at the museum.

You might say that Tucker's exhibition of Tuttle had forced an unwelcome revaluation of values—for an institution, for a critic (in this case, the legendary curmudgeon Hilton Kramer), for the contemporary art audience, indeed for a whole system of rendering art's value that was then in a moment of radical flux.

Tucker, it so happens, went on to found her own museum for contemporary art—the New Museum here in New York, as it is still called today, though no longer so new. You could say Tuttle's work tendered Tucker to those shores upon which she would found this new institution, fundamentally altering the landscape of contemporary art.

Such is the effect of Tuttle's tenderness on art's history.

To say Tuttle's work is tender rather than precious does not mean his works are not coveted. Materially sumptuous, they readily seduce. They are nevertheless always matter-of-fact. Nothing is overwrought or unduly embellished. Everything is necessary, essential.

Tuttle's works are seductive, yes, but they do not proposition my attention, they are never coy about what they ask of me. The origins of these materials are always laid bare. Nothing is left beneath the surface. All surface is made equal. One thing is as good as another. Diamonds and coal both come from the same earth, Tuttle seems to say—sourced from the same ground.

Where is the ground of Tuttle's art? Where are the frames that contain his figures? Tuttle is a world-maker, I think, insofar as he eschews the containment of a frame. All that's left to frame Tuttle's art is the gallery and the world itself, a world that he himself calls into existence.

I name this world, "our world." I think of the essay, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in which the philosopher Martin Heidegger speaks of the "thingness" of artworks and their "worlding" power. He reminds us of the fact that a painting is, in the end, just matter—stuff like any other stuff. A sculpture is a thing to be shipped down a river on a boat as if it were coal.

But like coal, art can be fuel. It can be fed into the combustion engine of consciousness to give heat to life. An exhibition of Tuttle's work is an offering of such sustenance.

If I consult the dictionary again, I find another definition of "tender": a small craft, such as a ship, employed to attend other, usually larger ships—to provision them with supplies, to facilitate communication, or to transport passengers to and from shore. Tuttle's art, it might be said, is precisely in fashioning such crafts. This helps me understand the "distance" to which the title, *A Distance from This*, refers. The craft of art is the bridging of distance.

To tender is to deliver. Tenderness is deliverance.

But what is the "this" of *A Distance from This*? From the 1960s onward, Tuttle has been deeply involved with an idea of art as a kind of grammar. Language lies at the center of his practice. Grammatically, "this" always stands for an object, direct or indirect. A "this" is a thing on which to focus an action, a sentence, a subject.

Tuttle's work fashions us as subjects. He does so by inviting us to attend to our perception in a different way. Most of the time, we pay attention to our daily tasks, our chores, our vocations, our families. But art demands a different mode of attendance and attention, one which involves knowledge rather than action. Here, attendance is the opposite of ignorance. Tuttle deals precisely in an economy of attendance and attention.

These days, attendance and attention are always at a premium. We rarely give of these things freely. Instead, we pay them out. Tuttle's works don't say "Pay attention!" They are far too quiet for that. They don't set a price for my regard. They don't auction themselves off to my eyes. Instead, they remind me that I am free to give of myself and my time—to be present, to partake in a gesture of mutual generosity between myself and the work.

I want to say that there are no viewers of Tuttle's work, there are only attendants. When we step into an exhibition of Richard Tuttle, we are all gallery attendants. An attendant might be a person who escorts or waits on another, as in some regal personage attended by a royal retinue. If I gaze upon them tenderly, how regal do the clumped up bits of paper towel in Tuttle's works appear to me? How aristocratic are the bent and scored bits of styrofoam? There is a baroque quality this humble artifice; there is opulence and spectacle in the ordinariness of these forms. These works are majesties. I am summoned to attend at the court of Tuttle's craft.

It may be easy to overlook the mix of exuberance and evanescence through which Tuttle' mediates grandiosities: form, language, memory. Such categories seem far too large to describe the uneven strips of wood, coarsely carved cardboard, roughhewn planes of scrap metal, rolled or folded sheets of paper, bent rubber tubes, bits of planar particleboard, cotton batting, duct tape, and, of course, color in the form of paint—the things through which Tuttle orchestrates the most humble and mundane of objects into radiant symphonies, blissful ecstasies. Tuttle's is an art of couplings as unlikely as they are majestic. Tuttle asks: What makes a world? What ligaments bind art and life? Yes, *A Distance From This* is a body of work, but it is also a set of questions about what a body is, what holds a body together, what holds a universe together.

The magic of Tuttle's conjuring subsists in this questioning. But it blooms further, into an uncanny power to rescue materials from ignorance into attendance, from self-evidence into self-questioning, to choreograph the mundane into harmonies and intimacies at once uncomfortable and elegant, aggressive and tender. In his work, Tuttle coaxes dissonant textures into acts of astonishing and often provocative embrace. Rubber and wire kiss, wood and paper interpenetrate. The colored bits of felt in *Prong 25* thread through three almost intestinal arcs of interwoven chickenwire, as if festooned with ribbons or streamers.

Tuttle is a seducer of matter. Before we know it, we are enveloped in his cunning and his mystery. He involves us in a complex of surfaces and interiors, in manifolds of skin and cavity. Tuttle is all romance.

It could be said that the works in this exhibition at 125 Newbury are a summation as well as a turning point for the artist. In February of 2024, shortly before completing this body of work, Tuttle traveled to various sites of Mayan ruins in Guatemala. This experience is registered in ways both tangible and ineffable. Writing and language proliferate in Mayan architecture, impregnating the built environment with semiotic value. Tuttle's sculptures are similarly pregnant with language. They begin by summoning language as form. "Are they glyphs?" asks Tuttle of these works, "Do they relate to writing? Are they a writing system? Are they part of a desire to record, maintain, and re-access? What are they trying to record?"

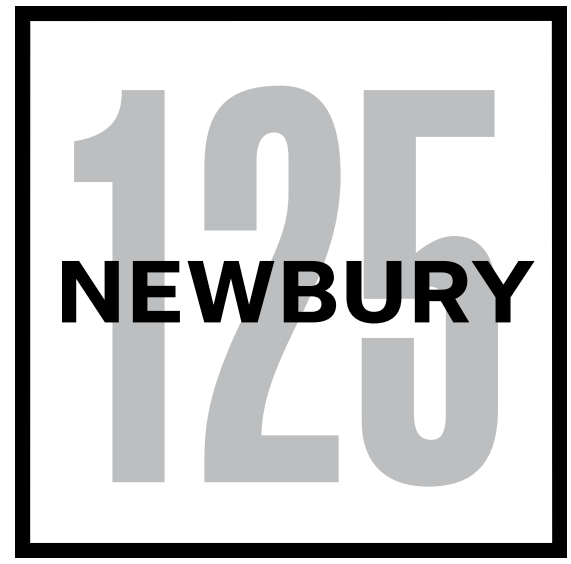
Each of Tuttle's works offers me a record of its own making. That is the function of writing, after all—to record its own birth into presence. As he has done in all his work since the beginning of his career, Tuttle lays bare the process of his craft. The story of every cut and every brushstroke, every bend and fold, every twist of wire remains visible in the form it creates.

The invitation Tuttle tenders us is this: to return with him through time, to travel back into the process of making. His works are memories of their own delivery into the world. They vouchsafe the indelible entanglements of matter and memory.

An artwork is always a relic of a maker, a conduit or trace back to a specific existence. An artwork is a map that marks an open space: a distance between us and another—between this world of ours and that one over there. Tuttle's task is to tender us across that distance. His art is a bridge without a toll. It spans the divide between the "me" and the "not me," between subject and object, between the immediacy of a thing and the animating spirit that enlivens it. In other words, between art and life.

Walk tenderly, this work seems to say—in a voice barely more than a whisper—for there is always more to witness along the way.

Prong, 25, 2024. Cardboard, wood, wire, felt, spray paint, nails. 36" × 57" × 6½"



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