

*“Simply what my work has told me:” An interview with Richard Tuttle*¹

Laura Lake Smith²

Abstract:

Artist Richard Tuttle sits down with Laura Lake Smith in Maine to chat about his recent work and what he has learned during his career as an artist. Tuttle speaks about perseverance in the art world, his contributions to art, making an art for everyone, and how art should create “value.” He also discusses why he recently threw out an entire year’s worth of work and why not being a mega art star is alright with him.

After over forty years in the art world, Richard Tuttle is still learning what it means to be an artist. The shy and gentle man, often labeled a Post-Minimalist, continues to work as hard for art as he did when he first debuted his work in the 1960s in New York at the Betty Parsons Gallery. Known for its untraditional materials and even more for its unconventional appearances, Tuttle’s body of art includes abstracted paintings, letter cut-outs, octagonal cloth works, drawings on loose leaf paper, delicate wire wall pieces, and recently, sculptural cloth objects, shown in his “Walking on Air” exhibition at Pace Wildenstein in New York. Through his varied style of works, Tuttle has forced us to reevaluate our notions of art, particularly in terms of how we define it, perceive it and receive it. His prolific career as an artist includes a fair share of criticism, both positive and negative, and his story is well documented, from Marcia Tucker’s groundbreaking

¹ Richard Tuttle, Interview by Laura Lake Smith, August 1-2, 2009, Bar Harbor, Maine.

² Chair of the Department of Art and Design, Lipscomb University

"Simply what my work has told me". An interview with Richard Tuttle

exhibition and catalogue at the Whitney Museum of Art in 1975 (which led to her subsequent firing), to Hilton Kramer's very public and very scathing attack on Tuttle's work in the New York Times in response to that exhibition, and to the well-deserved San Francisco MOMA's 2005 traveling retrospective and catalogue, *The Art of Richard*



Richard Tuttle, September 2008

© Photo by Kerry Ryan McFate / Courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York

*Tuttle.*³ Now a legend in art history, Tuttle remains committed to making his unique work and to expanding his boundaries of knowledge that influence his perspectives and perceptions of art. When we met earlier this year for these conversations in Maine, Tuttle shared with me his recent ideas on art as well as the sage advice garnered from a life and love of art. As a self-proclaimed “servant of art,” Tuttle advocates for the “life of the mind” and, in doing so, continues to educate and shape our notions of what artist can be and can do in society.

Laura Lake Smith: In telling the story of your work, many viewers and, many students of art for that matter, have been left speechless and confused about how to tell others what it is that you do. And, your work seems to defy the norms of narrative. But if you could, how would you communicate what the narrative, or the story, of your work is?

Richard Tuttle: I think that one of the things that interest me a lot is that the Renaissance gave us a lot of good things and a lot of bad things. What I consider a bad thing now, although I can understand why people thought it was a good thing at the time, is this idea that art is about a single point in time and space. So you get the Madonna and then that’s it. That’s your picture. It is one moment in time and space. And the photograph has come out of that as well, stopping time and stopping space. I am actually hugely excited by the idea that a picture could be movement in time and space. So I admire the art before the Renaissance where you would have the whole life of Christ in one moment. As art, you can experience a Duccio altar in Sienna as a totality. So you get this, as it were, a collapse. I find also what’s very important for me at the moment is society and structures. The structures of society to me are very much built on ordinary space, like the case of the Egyptians, the Greeks, the Mesopotamians and so on. You know—in the beginning was the word and the word was God. Who’s

³ Marcia Tucker’s exhibition and catalogue of 1975, *Richard Tuttle*, provides seminal perspective on Richard Tuttle’s art as does the SFMOMA exhibition and catalogue 30 years later, *The Art of Richard Tuttle*, edited by Madeline Grynsztejn, which included critical essays on the artist and his place in the history of art

not going to accept that? If you accept that then you can talk to each other, you can do things like build bridges. As an artist, for me, my greatest moments of my life have been when I have experienced non-ordinary space and the paradox is that—I mean, yes, I’m a boy scout, I did all the things that you need to do to be a good person and all that—but in my heart, I feel my job really is, through my work, to give people my excitement, my thrill, my happiness of experiencing non-ordinary space.

Laura Lake Smith: In previous interviews and lectures that you have given, you have discussed the importance of language and books and their influence on you and your work. What role do they play for you as an artist?

Richard Tuttle: We are living in a time when people say no one reads anymore. It’s over. It is problematic. I saw a t-shirt the other day that said simply “I love books.” Books should not become a sentimental thing. Right now, I’m going to have a show opening in London (this fall). And I’ve decided that just because it’s England, it is an opportunity to make common relationship, to make my life woven in with the life of that place. It’s a friendly, like a courteous thing. So I picked up a book that’s called *Londinium*. It fills in so many gaps. In this *Londinium* book you find that they tried to make it look as much like Rome as possible.

Laura Lake Smith: Did you make work specific for this London show?

Richard Tuttle: Not for this one.

Laura Lake Smith: Is it part of your “Walking on Air” work that was exhibited at Pace Wildenstein earlier this year?

Richard Tuttle: Yes but a different group. I have felt that the English reception to my work has not really been very strong and I've certainly shown there many times. We all know that the verbal culture is extremely important for the English but the visual is much less.

Laura Lake Smith: What do you want these works to say?

Richard Tuttle: I said to my daughter yesterday that there's a point when I get tongue-tied and I want to say something that includes both polarities and I just can't do it. And, at that point, you just jump over to the visual and thank God there's a visual. I see that art is a gift to span polarities in this world that cannot be spanned in life. You know, Maine is very important in these works in "Walking on Air." There's something that you may have noticed already as you look outside of the car. You see this density of the woods. When you are walking into it, in a few steps, you're in such a tangle and you're getting poked from all sides. That for some reason really excited me and I even call it a space because normally we are looking for space that is not tangled. And this is another new idea of mine. Notice that our cultures, the Western cultures, think very much in terms of the image. We love to make something an image, where the shadow falls outside of it. But there is a whole other part of the world, and here I point mostly to the Polynesian and Indonesian cultures, where the idea is exactly the opposite, to make an image where the shadow falls inside of it. And this is part of the polarities that I spoke of earlier. It is exciting, challenging, interesting, to find these polarities which could be very invisible or taken for granted to such a degree that we lose them. And I always feel that there's no hurt in trying. Because, one of my statements is "I'm for it all. I want it all." And well, what's standing between you and having it all? I mean, it's only art and being involved with art, you will come to a point where you say, "Well, how it is that everything I'm looking at, the shadow falls outside?" The mind knows that's only one half of it. So, how does somebody who is truly grown in this

cultural tradition find their way to another cultural tradition? And I'm not the first person to do this in art. That's been a theme in contemporary art for some period of time, the transitioning from one culture to another culture; it's one of the most brilliant themes in contemporary art. The artist's job used to be to make an image but as an artist now, I don't have the church to tell me what I'm supposed to do or what my job is. I have to go out and find my job myself. I'm sure that's smart or it's wise but then don't hold me back. So when I look at an image that is formed, as it were, from the inside out and I look at that surface, that's better than Michelangelo. It's very embarrassing and challenging because I'm no longer going to cast my vote in Michelangelo column anymore. I see that. I can experience that, but then that's not enough. Another great line of my friend Agnes Martin is that the art experience is when you can put yourself in a position where you see (the work) the way that the artist who made it sees it. So, if it's an art from a culture where the shadow falls inside, how can you get to that point where you can see what they saw? And it's fun. For me this density of this forest in Maine is tangled space but its impenetrable space and that was a way for me to get to this. The lower half of the work is the part where the shadow falls inside and the top part is where the shadow falls outside. If an artist follows their work, even blindly, it does have a logic. A lot of the things I will say are simply what my work has told me and I have no problem with saying that to someone else.

Laura Lake Smith: Do you feel drawn to things or concepts or issues that are impenetrable and dense?

Richard Tuttle: It's a kind of a stasis. I think that a lot of my work falls into the style of stasis, rather than dynamic. I find you can offer something that's not available. So most art seems to me to be about the issues of the dynamic but there's very little art that about stasis. I am naturally drawn to that myself because I feel it's such a mystery. We know that there is no such thing as rest. Rest for me is a fascinating subject because it's the hardest thing that a human being can do in life. I have a little list of things for

each day and rest is one of them. I try to rest for two hours and if I can actually rest for 30 seconds, that's a huge victory. And it's extremely important with creativity because if you don't rest, you are guaranteed burn out. It's one of the things that they should teach in teach art schools because there, it's all about production and meeting your requirements. If I were teaching, I would do a course on rest, creative rest.

Laura Lake Smith: Earlier in the year, you mentioned to me that you had recently thrown out an entire body of work, a year's worth of art. The artists around us at that time later told me that they almost broke into tears upon hearing you say that. You went on to say to us that in life you cannot do that, you just cannot throw something away but in art you can and you must. How can you do that when you know you don't want to do that? Why must you do it?

Richard Tuttle: I have a daughter who wants to be an artist. I have to be a father one moment and a teacher one moment and I say to her, "You just have to love art and art is going to test you over and over again." It's going to take people who aren't even artists and who are insulting to art and they're just going to throw it in your face and say, "ha, ha," and they're going to win all of the accolades and you're not. You can't imagine how hard art will test you. And even the issue of achieving art, because there is a moment when—we gratefully live in a democracy and art should be available to everyone—just because you want to make art or you say you're making art, does not mean that you are making art. And, there are reasons that the look-a-likes, the true and the false, have to live together because it's a democracy. But in terms of yourself really—what you are and who you are—there is no substitute and if you care, you will value the moment when art allows you to achieve art. It has nothing to do with you and the only thing that you can do is love it and love it and love it. And, then maybe you will be allowed. And, even then, it's hard because it's a surrendering. You have to surrender your ego, your very self over to art and do what art wants you to do. Then

you find that whatever you thought you could achieve by yourself is unbelievably trumped by what art can do. So, this distinction of what life needs you to do and what art needs you to do are the absolutely opposite sides of the coin. Even today, I would not be as comfortable talking about throwing away that amount of work—I still can’t believe it myself—but yet I know that it was the right thing for art. And, this is another idea of Agnes Martin’s that I told to my daughter. When you make something, it’s “in the direction” of your work. You can be absolutely enamored and enthusiastic and transformed by one of these things that you make. But all of that is actually a mentality that sees that it as a finality, as an end thing. And it’s not by nature an end thing. It’s a “in the direction to something,” which is the end. And that’s a very, very hard lesson for young artists. Because you hope, even if you know it’s on the way and not the end, you wish that it were the end. In throwing away that body of work—there were hundreds of pieces—what I was throwing away was all of those wishes that they were the end and that actually makes me feel very happy.

Laura Lake Smith: You have said that your art is smarter than you are. Do you allow the smartness of your art to lead you in creating?

Richard Tuttle: Art, in my opinion, is exclusively concerned with the mind. There’s the mind, the spirit and the body. The biggest emphasis is on the body. You know, we have to eat, the physical needs, our relations, how we fit into society, it’s all about the body. Then there’s the spirit. For a long time, I thought my interests were on the spirit side of things because my family was religious. As a teenager, I would be invited to speak in congregation and this was desperately important for me. And, I had an older brother who had a huge success the year before and I had to equal him or over-exceed that and I failed miserably. It was very upsetting. But then years later, I realized that I thought I was talking about spiritual issues but I was actually talking about art because art was the thing for me that was the most important.

Laura Lake Smith: So it supersedes the spiritual?

Richard Tuttle: Well, I wouldn't say that but the mind issues and questions and quandaries of mind are what I, as it were, was born to be. I'm somebody who is given to that direction. Of course, at the same time, I have my bodily issues and I have my spiritual issues. But, in general you can look out into America of 2009, as a body of 300 million people or something like that, and say "how's it going?" "How's the body thing, how's the mind thing and how's the spirit thing?" The spirit is reasonably good and the body thing is kind of ok too but the mind thing is not ok. (The mind) is really, in a way, sacrificed for the other two. The life of the mind, the inner life, is possible and can be enjoyed.

Laura Lake Smith: Around the time of the critical backlash of the 1975 Whitney exhibition, you mentioned in an interview that America does not know how to treat an artist. It seems that we have shifted now to such a global society in art and with that, the treatment of artists is also more global. But, do you feel that the earlier issue of how to treat artists in America still exists?

Richard Tuttle: One of the most powerful motivations in my life's work has been expanding, because I want to make an art that works for everyone on earth, not just people from a certain place. And, this is a full circle to the conversation. I'm actually very proud that I've succeeded in making an art that will work for people who come from a tradition where the shadow falls outside of the work and from a tradition where it falls inside of the work. And that's not easy. Again, I accept the fact that it's a fight. It's one thing to do it and another thing to put it across. These are things that I consider very valuable. I'm not an absolutist or a dictator. I welcome going through

the process of the marketplace or the academic world or the world of real culture as a way that will naturally and painlessly pull out the value of what I have to offer.

Laura Lake Smith: You have spoken here today about value in art and you spoke recently about creating value in art in the talk that I heard. It seems to be something rather important to you and something that you want to emphasize. What creates value in art or what is it to create value in art?

Richard Tuttle: The play here is the word "value," of course. I know very well how the word is normally used. I was trying to shift to a word that we can also use when we address the mind. And so, another question that you might ask is, "what is value in the mind?" Well one of the things we know is that which makes the mind healthy and fully itself and serviceable and rich. So an artwork, a drawing even, that would do that would be a valuable drawing. In fact, in art history, there are certain drawings that are outstanding and one must assume that they are (creating value). I remember as a very small child when I realized, unlike the rest of family who were happy to live quiet lives and obscure lives, that I had to live a life that was out in the world and part of that was about being distressed and astonished. You know, I'm kind of a quiet and sensitive type. I don't do well in the firing line of things. But I have also felt that there is an excitement to get to look over the horizon and all that kind of stuff. Even in this discussion, it is much more important for me to get to make these contributions, if contributions they are, than to stand out as a star. Because I'm also not stupid—when you stand out you just invite envy and enmity and then that's a sure way that your ideas will be shot down. So for me, the second tier, the second level, is the very one that achieves. After I'm dead or something, then so what, no one is going to envy you when you're dead.

Bibliography

Grynsztejn, Madeleine, ed. *The Art of Richard Tuttle*. New York: San Francisco Modern Museum of Art and Distributed Art Publishers, Inc., 2005.

Tucker, Marcia. *Richard Tuttle*. New Haven: Eastern Press, 1975.

Tuttle, Richard. Interview by Laura Lake Smith. Bar Harbor, Maine. August 1-2, 2009.