

# AS **Richard Tuttle** PREPARES FOR HIS FIRST SOLO SHOW IN LONDON IN 12 YEARS, JONATHAN T.D. NEIL ASSESSES THE AMERICAN'S CONTRIBUTION TO SHAPING WHATEVER IT IS THAT WE MEAN WHEN WE TALK ABOUT 'ART'



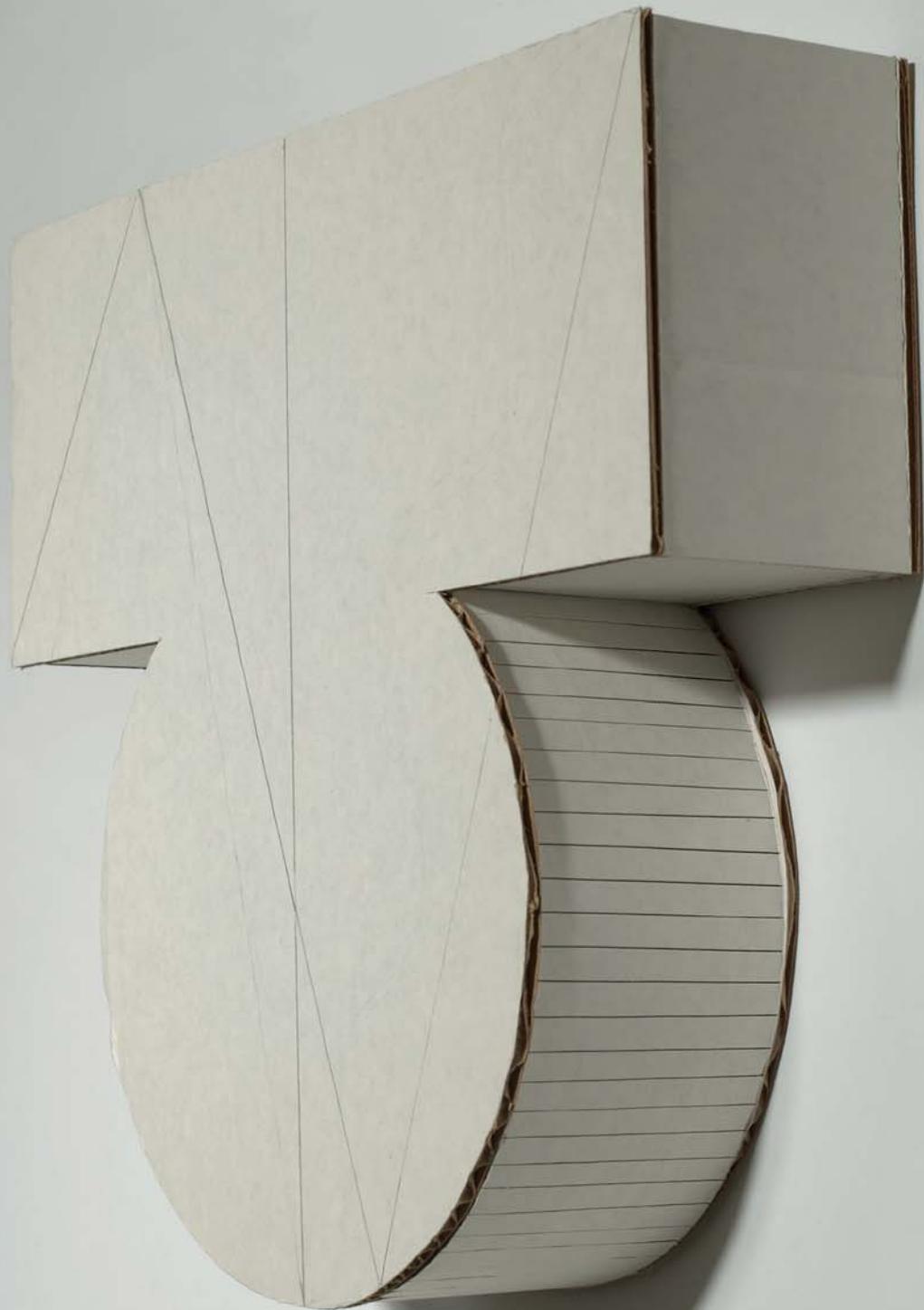
**RICHARD TUTTLE**, *Walking on Air*, C5 (2009): two panels of thin cotton fabric, each a foot high and a few inches over ten feet long; the top panel bears two rows of grommets placed at regular (15 and  $3/8$  of an inch) intervals that pierce and hem its upper and lower edge; the bottom panel has only one row of grommets along its upper edge; a running stitch hems the lower one. The grommets allow the panels to be hung together at eye level on a double row of nails, with the top panel overlapping the bottom by an inch (the grommet width), while the lower edge of the bottom panel hangs free. This loose hanging creates a pattern of subtle billows that reads like a diagram depicting forces on a load-bearing beam. The left and right edges of each panel are hand-cut and unfinished. The top panel is dyed a faded tangerine; some slight discolouration occurs just left of centre. The bottom panel bears a series of irregular red stains that bleed a watery pink into their vicinity; the densest stain resides just under the discolouration of the top panel. Though asymmetric in intensity, the regular vertical creasing of the bottom panel suggests a symmetry of distribution, like a Rorschach blot with uneven inking. Other 'x'-patterned creases accompany the vertical ones across the bottom panel, but these appear unrelated to the stains in any way. Two horizontal creases mark the middle of the top panel and are flanked by two more 'x' patterns; again, no relation to the panel's colouring. The lower edge of the bottom panel is hemmed with an orange thread.

Why have I stopped here? What licenses the end of such a description? Consideration of the reader's tolerance for tedium might be one excuse. But were I really that considerate, I would have cut the paragraph above by half (or more; in any case, making assumptions about others' tolerance is always ill-advised). No, the question I am interested in, the question that Richard Tuttle's recent *Walking on Air* series (seen at PaceWildenstein in New York earlier this year and at Modern Art in London this month) asks – indeed, what all of Tuttle's best work asks – is what exactly can be counted as part of the work of art? What, that is, properly belongs to the work as a bearer of meaning, and what is merely incidental to it?

These are not new questions, of course. At least since literary critics W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley published the 'The Intentional Fallacy' in 1946, and so formalised (which is to say theorised) the major tenets of the New Criticism, the matrix of the artist's intention, the work's autonomy and the viewer's share has largely shaped methods of critical assessment and, by extension, the contest of artistic meaning.

Tuttle's art matured at the moment when the final of those three ideas, the viewer's share (and all that it entailed), was just beginning to trade up for a bigger property within the critical enclave. For a while Tuttle was associated with Minimalism, and then with Postminimalism, the arts of which, so understood, placed great store by the audience as executor of the work – phenomenologically, epistemically, discursively. But Tuttle's gambit never played well within the minimal and postminimal arenas. Though the *Constructed Paintings* and the *Wire, Cloth and Rope Pieces* from the 1960s and 70s were easily assimilated to debates regarding medium specificity – the 'neither painting nor sculpture' of Donald Judd's 'Specific Objects' (1965); as Tuttle quite seriously notes, he sees his work as legible within a continuum described by calligraphy at one pole and architecture at the other – those debates never exhausted the kinds of questions these works were asking, and which the *Walking on Air* series continues to do.

In asking what properly belongs to the work and what is incidental to it, Tuttle's art does not do away with the limits of autonomy, intention and aesthetic experience but rather subjects them to a severe intensification, a hypostatisation (which belies the clichés of 'subtlety' and 'whimsy' that attend all of the most useless assessments of his art). This is why, for example, every





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critic associated with *The New Criterion* has never failed to trash Tuttle's work for not being 'art' enough (Peter Campion: 'Tuttle's work can't stand alone. It needs the context of the museum to provide the small effect it does'; James Panero: 'Tuttle's art is not so much ready-made as Reddi-Wip, a pastiche of modernism in convenient spray form, aerosoled [sic] Paul Klee, silly-string Miró'; and of course Hilton Kramer, back in 1975: 'One is tempted to say that, so far as art is concerned, less has never been less than this').

Such intensification also produces the opposite response – that is, that Tuttle's art is almost 'too much'. (In a recent interview with the artist, Arne Glimcher, no stranger to acute artistic assessments, claims he has always regarded Tuttle's work as 'opulent' or 'extravagant'.) But, I would argue, Tuttle's art is too much, or it is not enough, exactly because it is forever challenging the attentions of its audience as to what is and what is not the work.

Often this question gets re-posed as what is and is not the work of the artist – ie, as a question of intention. Tuttle's *Wire Pieces* offer an early example of how the artist turned to the obstinacy of materials to challenge his own authority over the work. Juxtaposing a pencil line on a wall (the quintessential mark of the artist's, indeed *anyone's*, manifest and intentional presence) with a wire that the artist has attempted to coerce into a three-dimensional manifestation of that line (plus the shadow the wire will now cast) involves the artist in a kind of submission to the incidental. Could the artist have intended the piece to appear just so? Perhaps, but always up to a limit, at which point there occurs a loss of authority, and more importantly, an acceptance on the part of the audience that the artist intends this loss.

This oscillation of intention and incident is what connects Tuttle to contemporary artists from Gedi Sibony to Liz Deschenes. Though these artists are in the business of picking away at rich veins within the history of Modernism, we might say they have benefited greatly from the claims that Tuttle has been at pains to reconnoitre for the better part of 40 years. The *Walking on Air* series stands as key evidence; the intentional/incidental oscillation is at work literally everywhere in it: could Tuttle have intended those 'billows', mentioned above, which result from the pieces' unique solution to the problem of how they are to hang on the wall? Of course, but he could not wholly *determine* them. The same thing can be said of the patterns of stains; each is intended but not entirely determined. The colours of the panels themselves? Surely intended, not wholly determined. And though this may begin to sound like a simple rehashing of the overtures to 'process' that shaped the historical milieu out of which Tuttle emerged, every piece bears some element that says that Tuttle is after the dialectic of intention and incident over and above any of the false promises of process. In *C5*, it is the symmetry of the stains in the lower panel; in *C6*, the triangular cuts out of both panels' ends; *C13*, the small square of canvas that has been sewn behind the upper left grommet; *C1* and *C10*, the bottom panel that overlaps the top; and so on.

In general, we call these 'details', but they are details that take up residence within works which so often present themselves, particularly at first glance, as nothing more than incidental, which is what Tuttle's best work has always done. What is more, to get at these details, one has to get close to the work, close enough so as to lose sight of it as a 'whole', which each piece's lateral extension nearly guarantees. This is, justifiably, the viewer's share.



There is another artist whose work too took an obvious stake in the viewer's share. Agnes Martin's paintings required that one move in close to register their details, and then, upon moving back out, to take note, if not to occupy, that limen where their identities, as details, became indistinct. Given Tuttle's long friendship and intellectual kinship with Martin, it seems appropriate that Tuttle's *Walking on Air* would echo, and so pay homage to (the elder artist died in 2004), this aspect of Martin's art; I think it is an echo we would be wrong to regard as merely incidental. ♣

*Richard Tuttle, L'nger Than Life, is on view at Modern Art, London, from 11 September to 10 October*

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WORKS  
(IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

***Walking on Air, C5***, 2009, cotton with Rit dyes, grommets, thread, 2 panels, 58 x 512 cm.  
© the artist. Courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York, and Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London

***Constructed Cardboard Drawing (White)***, 1997, graphite on corrugated cardboard, 31 x 31 x 8 cm.  
Photo: G.R. Christmas. © the artist. Courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York

***Painted Boxes 21***, 1999, acrylic on museum board, 25 x 13 x 5 cm.  
Photo: Kerry Ryan McFate. © the artist. Courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York

***Fiction Fish I, Z***, 1992, graphite and ribbon on cardboard, graphite line, 13 x 11 x 3 cm.  
Photo: G.R. Christmas. © the artist. Courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York

***Two with Any To #18***, 1999, acrylic on fir plywood, 28 x 28 x 4 cm.  
Photo: G.R. Christmas. © the artist. Courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York

***Two or More XIII***, 1984, cardboard, wood, plastic, plastic cups, wire, paper, paint, foil  
123 x 102 x 19 cm. © the artist. Courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York