

## The line forms here

Richard Tuttle's retrospective at the MCA shows 40 years of tackling space. By **Ruth Lopez**

On the second-to-last stop of a six-city tour, Richard Tuttle was at the Museum of Contemporary Art recently installing his show, though he put it another way.

"First thing, it's not my show; it's Madeleine Grynsztejn's show," Tuttle says. Grynsztejn is the curator at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art who organized "The Art of Richard Tuttle"—the retrospective covering 40 years of the postminimalist's work that's currently on display at the MCA. The art world is rarely this ego-free and Tuttle's gentle comment immediately reorients the conversation away from the particulars of hanging a show and toward larger ideas like the role of art historians, museums and public art. "My work is really about trying to invade the world space with art space," he says, "and that is not the same as taking a sculpture and putting it in the middle of a plaza."

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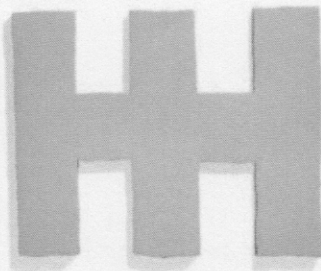
Since 1964, when Tuttle was in his early twenties, he has been finessing ideas about language, line, form and space using the simplest of materials. His first gallery show was with the legendary Betty Parsons, whose gallery was home mostly to the robust abstract expressionists but also to the spare minimalists, like Agnes Martin, a friend of Tuttle's who was also transfixed by lines. But he quickly stood out from his contemporaries. Tuttle works on a small scale using basic materials like wire, bubble wrap, cardboard, cloth, styrofoam and wood. He also tends to hang his pieces low—almost to the level of a dropped gaze.

How his abstract assemblages, paintings and sculpture occupy a room is crucial to Tuttle's practice, so it follows that each venue hosting this exhibition would present the work in an entirely different way. For Chicago,

this translates not only to one of the finest uses we've seen of the MCA's top floor but it may be the most insightful version of this particular exhibit. The building's design is partially responsible; its four long barrel-vaulted galleries correspond with Tuttle's four decades of work. And each gallery was also able to accommodate pieces that were not included in the other locations.

The MCA, designed by the late German architect Josef Paul Kleihues and completed in 1995, has never been as celebrated as it is here; Tuttle praised the "East-West energy" of the building's architecture. Where others have seen it as a giant hulk blocking access to the lake, Tuttle sees it as connecting the lake to the city. Sitting in the museum's café with him, it's easy to see what he means—though looking out the café's giant windows it becomes far more evident than the view from the front of the building, with its formidable stairs leading up to the entrance. Tuttle has drawn the line even if we can't see it.

In the room dedicated to Tuttle's 1990s career, filled with work referencing his New Mexico home, the artist has painted bands of blue and yellow on the walls of the gallery and numerous works on paper are hung in a way that appears scattershot—some quite high, some quite low. But Tuttle is very deliberate about where things go and this could be, in part, an inversion of the salon style of stacked paintings. The effect, as one stands back, is a collection of pictures that appear to bounce up and down like notes on a musical scale. Such buoyancy is also evident in the 1960s gallery with vibrantly painted wall sculptures of wafer board and other abstract forms of hand-cut canvas or wood hung in low relief. Along the back wall is a series of letterlike forms, alluding to the alphabet. By not hanging these pieces flush on the wall, they appear to float in the space.



House, 1965.



Ten, A, 2000.

In the 1970s, Tuttle created a series of sculptures (or drawings) of wire that jut out of the wall. These seemingly modest pieces connect to fine pencil lines which have been drawn directly onto the gallery wall, barely distinguishable from the wire shadows created by carefully placed lighting. At one end of the room, a series of accordion walls, like flimsy room dividers, seem to make a crack on community-center art displays or other modest means of showing art.

Tuttle is known to be prolific but he says that there are certain pieces that have taken him 40 years to understand. "Working with the same pieces is a chance to learn a different kind of art," he says. Because of the way he works with space, it was not possible to know exactly which pieces would be displayed.

The installation process is also an intuitive one. Were there some locations that worked better for particular pieces? "I learned here [at

the MCA]...first of all, an artwork is like a person—there is no absolute place you see a person," he says. Which is to say that all of our qualities cannot be seen from one angle or at one time.

It's hard to fathom how Tuttle's quiet work could have enraged people in the early days, but it did. The late Whitney curator Marcia Tucker lost her job as a result of the critical bashing his show got in 1977. It did not deter him, nor did it Tucker: She went on to form the New Museum in New York, and Tuttle is now being recognized as one of our most important contemporary artists. Good thing he didn't give up. Perhaps it helps to have strong convictions: "The art thing brings you all the good things in life," he says. "You might be poor... but you'll have a beautiful life."

*"The Art of Richard Tuttle" is on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art through February 4, 2007.*