

Commissioned by Castlefield Gallery to coincide with the exhibition, *Real Painting*.

Painting qua painting (as noun and verb)

Tell him of things. He will stand astonished.¹

By Craig Staff

Writing in 'Hapticity and Time: Notes on Fragile Architecture,' Juhani Pallasmaa speaks of the need, at least in relation to the experiential basis of the discipline the paper was originally directed towards, to reinstate "opacity and depth, sensory invitation and discovery, mystery and shadow."² As a way of highlighting this apparent sensory gap or caesura, Pallasmaa seeks recourse to, *inter alia*, the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Philosopher and author of *Phenomenology of Perception*, 1945):

My perception is [therefore] not a sum of visual, tactile, and audible givens: I perceive in a total way with my whole being: I grasp a unique structure of the thing, a unique way of being, which speaks to all my senses at once.³

On one level, Pallasmaa's foregrounding of embodied experience, an emphasis he sought to inscribe as the means whereby the perceived "loss of materiality and temporal experience" could be countered, rehearses a particular set of debates that marked the project of late modernism and more specifically, Minimalism.⁴ Whilst the latter's adoption of Merleau-Ponty's ideas have been well rehearsed, the conditions of possibility for the continuation of this approach after Minimalism remains a compelling question.

In this respect, and at this particular moment, we can arguably take Richard Tuttle's art practice as being emblematic of the means by which, although it shared a preoccupation with what Merleau-Ponty described, with regard to the canvasses of Paul Cézanne, as the "lived perspective" of the artwork, it did not correspond to Minimalism's often highly rationalised approach to the artwork's organisation.⁵

Although the Octagonal series, a body of work that Tuttle had first conceived in cloth in 1967 and subsequently realised in paper and then wire became increasingly pared down, the series nevertheless remained reliant upon and, to a certain extent delimited by the reciprocity between the body of the work and the respective bodies of the artwork's audience.⁶ Indeed, Marcia Tucker (Curator of Painting and Sculpture at

¹ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, in Stephen Mitchell, *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, New York: Random House, 1982, unpaginated.

² Juhani Pallasmaa, 'Hapticity and Time Notes On A Fragile Architecture,' *The Architectural Review*, vol. 207, no.1239, May 2000, p. 78.

³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'The Film and the New Psychology'. In Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1964, p.18 reproduced in Pallasmaa, 'Hapticity and Time Notes On A Fragile Architecture,' p. 78.

⁴ Pallasmaa, 'Hapticity and Time Notes On A Fragile Architecture,' p. 80.

⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt," in *Sense and Non-Sense*, Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus, (trans.), Evanston, Ill, 1964, p. 14.

⁶ As Madeleine Grynstein notes: "[Tuttle's *Paper Octagonals*] appeared toward the end of a five-year period during which Tuttle's work underwent a successive reduction in its object quality, most clearly demonstrated by his work with the octagonal shape, made first in cloth, then in paper, and finally in wire. Tuttle made a total of twelve *Paper Octagonals*, their shapes based on a square set on its side and cut off at its corners: while the first examples have a pronounced symmetry, the later ones are more eccentric (with the last "octagonal" being nine sided)." Madeleine

the Whitney Museum of American Art, 1969-76 and founder of The New Museum, New York, 1977) sought to further extend this idea in the essay she wrote to accompany Tuttle's show at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1975 by triangulating into this exchange the body of the artist. Positioning Tuttle's practice at that time in a way such that it became analogous to dance, Tucker would make the following claim:

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.⁷

Notwithstanding the possibility for the artwork to remain imbricated with the artist's own body, what the Whitney exhibition more broadly educated was that the "critical reception of the art was a fundamental aspect of the landscape of artistic production."⁸

On one level, the conditions of the visible, such as they pertain to both Tuttle's Octagonal series and to the works included in *Real Painting* (Castlefield Gallery, Manchester, UK 2015), are organised around an understanding that painting, or at least some account thereof, functions as the implicit horizon.

Whilst Tuttle's work emerged at a point wherein painting, albeit in a contested sense, could still be considered in relation to the idea of it as being a fully bounded, discrete idiom, today no such assurances prevail. Instead, Andrew Blauvelt's (Graphic Designer and Curator) statement, which worked to frame *Painting at the Edge of the World*, an exhibition that was staged at the Walker Art Center (Minneapolis, USA) in 2001, remains more broadly indicative of a concern that painting tendentiously continues to negotiate with:

To expand notions of painting beyond these delimited essences would be to acknowledge the aggregative and complex conditions that constitute painting's heterogeneity. In other words, it would not be simply enough to ask what makes a painting a painting, but rather to understand the ways in which painting differs from itself.⁹

However, and conversely, it is because Tuttle's practice sought to foreground the artwork's innate (rather than essential) characteristics that his statement of 1972 naturally extends to encompass the works that fall within *Real Painting's* purview.

It is however an estimable fact that an artwork exists in its own reality and in *that* exists a certain cause and effect pattern which has baffled the ancients as well as myself. To make something which looks like itself is, therefore, the problem, the solution. To make something which is its own unraveling, its own justification, is something like the dream.¹⁰

Grynstein, "A Universe of Small Truths," *The Art of Richard Tuttle*, Madeleine Grynstein (ed.), New York: Art Publishers, p. 33. The artist's contribution to the Biennale in 1976 was a diminutively scaled piece of wood "No larger than two joints of a finger, stuck on the wall and identified by a label that occupies more space than the object itself." Hilton Kramer, "our Venice Offering – More a Syllabus than a Show," *New York Times*, 2 May 1976, reproduced in Grynstein, p. 45.

⁷ Marcia Tucker, *Richard Tuttle*, New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1975, pp. 15–16.

⁸ Adam D. Weinberg, "1975 Exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art," reproduced in Grynstein, p. 149.

⁹ Andrew Blauvelt, 'No Visible Means of Support,' in *Painting at the Edge of the World*, Douglas Fogle (ed.), Minneapolis, Minnesota: Walker Art Center, 2001), p. 125.

¹⁰ Richard Tuttle, "Work Is Justification for the Excuse," in *Documenta 5* (Kassel: Documenta, 1972), reproduced in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1996, p. 609.

Herein, one could say, resides a tension that marks the project (rather than the idiom) of painting today. On the one hand, to not in some way acknowledge, even tacitly, the conditions of which Blauvelt speaks would be churlish, if not circumspect; conversely, to acknowledge such conditions is always to position one's enquiry in relation to the possibility of attempting to make painting *qua* painting, be it purportedly real or otherwise. The artists included within *Real Painting*, whilst certainly cognisant of the former, arguably make work that is oriented towards the latter.

What this means in real terms is that the works orient themselves to what one might characteristically describe as constituting the grammar of the pictorial, namely support, surface, facture, form, colour and ostensible flatness. Of course, these are not necessarily discrete elements that work independently of each other, but at times, and in certain instances, betray a co-dependency, what one might describe as a structural or indeed spatial co-mingling. So for example, in the case of Deb Covell's *Nowt to Summat* (2014), surface is so closely bound up with support that the two become ontologically all but indistinguishable. Equally, in the case of Jo McGonigal's *Yellow Yellow* (2015), whilst derived from the realm of the demotic, the ostensible form of the thing is the colour yellow.

Elsewhere in the exhibition works have been selected on the basis of the demands, both physical and temporal, that are placed on the viewer. This is partly due to the fact that the viewer is not required to become preoccupied with a work of art, and specifically painting, that is image-based. Indeed, one notable characteristic that is discernable with most if not all of the works in *Real Painting* is that they have relinquished dependency upon what one might, in the received sense at least, deem to be an 'image.'

For example, *Compressed 1 (White)*, (2010) by Angela de la Cruz, *11/20 Untitled*, (2014) by Finbar Ward and *Wiltshire Modulator II*, (2010) by Simon Callery can't be read through the image quite simply because in each case any image, at least in the received sense, is entirely absent. However, rather than construing the work as somehow being in deficit because of this basic fact, the particularity of their physical presence, or, in the case of *Wiltshire Modulator II*, its heft, is the necessary point from which we work outwards from. As Callery has noted: "I make physical paintings – because I am interested in the viewer as a physical being – a fully sentient, inquisitive, perceptive, decision-making, information-processing, emotional, idiosyncratic thinking being. I want the painting to involve and engage the full attention of that person."¹¹

Whilst one could arguably interpret the agency of this "physical being" as entailing, *inter alia*, "sensory invitation and discovery," the experiential basis of the artwork that Callery here is seeking to articulate and address perhaps more directly corresponds to and is consonant with another key reference in Pallasmaa's text, namely what Goethe (Johann Wolfgang von) termed "*Zarte Empirie*" (Delicate Empiricism), which, according to David Seamon, entailed "the effort to understand a thing's meaning through prolonged empathetic looking and seeing grounded in direct experience."¹²

More broadly, and as *Real Painting* educes, by acknowledging and, by extension, being prepared to understand the visible, if not the operative, conditions of painting, be they aggregative and complex or otherwise, then, and perhaps only then, can the project (and not the idiom) of painting make a reciprocal and reciprocated *something* which directly stems from its own unraveling, its own justification. Painting *qua* painting.

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¹¹ Simon Callery, *Interview in Abstract Critical* 22/8/12. Questions for Angela de la Cruz and Simon Callery: Enantiodromia Part I. Fold Gallery, London.

¹² David Seamon, 'Goethe, Nature and Phenomenology: An Introduction', in David Seamon and Arthur Zajone, *Goethe's Way of Science*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1988, p. 2, reproduced in Pallasmaa, 'Hapticity and Time Notes On A Fragile Architecture,' p. 81.