

Richard Tuttle

A few questions presented when looking at this drawing:

So what is this, I wonder? Let's see: two dots/ovals, black; on a neutral field; nothing else.

What are they? Do they mean something? What the heck is this about?

After puzzling for a while, we happen upon the back of the drawing (reproduced on the back of this card), on which the artist, Richard Tuttle (b. 1941), has written:

This drawing may be like the nostrils of a mother the child sees when he is in his mother's arms. Hence some confusion arises in what the eye perceives specifically in reference to something else, the mother, which in this instance is linked to an intellectual understanding that is perhaps one of the first errors due to both the eye and mind functions, and interplays.

What is this "first error" Tuttle talks about? What confusion is he referencing that arises between what the eye perceives and intellectual understanding, between "the eye and mind functions" and the interplay between them?

The psycho-physiological processes involved in seeing and understanding are complex and are not well understood. However, many perceptual psychologists believe that what we "see" (notice) is heavily influenced, and altered, by what we "understand." To make sense of the world around us, and to avoid being overloaded by visual stimuli, our brains focus on what we understand to be there, ignoring and not even "seeing" other things even though those other things, visually, may be just as prominent as what we focus on and notice. In other words, there is an "error" of sorts—a discrepancy—between what is literally there and what we "see".

What this means, of course, is that, as adults, we see things very differently than we did when we saw the world "through a child's eyes." For an infant, especially, everything is new and seen with an almost complete lack of understanding. The brain hasn't yet learned to focus on some things and to ignore others.

Our adult understanding provides significant benefits, of course. If we saw the world as a child does, we would be so bombarded by visual information that it would be difficult to function. However, we have also lost something by seeing as we do. It is difficult for us to see the world as we once did, to recapture the mystery of seeing without understanding.

Richard Tuttle came to prominence in the 1960s and 1970s by creating art works made of things that are generally overlooked: commonplace, ordinary objects such as cellophane, fabric, galvanized tin, wire, string, wood scraps, etc. At first blush, his works didn't seem much like artworks at all, and art world sophisticates were perplexed. However, Tuttle sought to look again at the mystery of the world around us. There can be magic in cellophane, fabric, galvanized tin, wire, string and wood scraps, so why can't those things be the basis of art? In an article in the *Financial Times* in September 2014, Tuttle said:

Most people are afraid of mystery. We've got science, religion and philosophy, so that we never have to deal with it. Art might be there to help us form a more comfortable relationship with mystery.

So let's come back to the initial questions posed above. What's this drawing of? Two black dots/ovals, floating on a neutral field. Nothing else. Our adult brain scrambles for meaning, for understanding.

By deleting all other visual information from the drawing, even we adults are plunged into a visual world that (as the title references) "may be like" that of a child—black dots/ovals, floating in space, a mystery. (The title of the work is "This drawing may be..."). However, when we read the text, we "understand" that the dots/ovals represent the mother's nostrils. After reading the text, it is impossible for us to eliminate that understanding and to see the dots/ovals as we did before. We have gained in understanding, but we have lost something too because the world is a less mysterious place.

In what seems like a simple drawing, Tuttle has created a thought experiment that captures this interplay between seeing and understanding. The drawing generates an experience that "may be like" one of the first moments when the world began to be a less mysterious place; a moment when we made "one of the first errors" between what we "see" and what we "understand." The drawing prompts us to ask ourselves what other such "errors" have we made? In what other ways has the world become less mysterious and magical?

Although writing at a different time and for a different purpose, Wassily Kandinsky's words in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1912) have relevance here:

Those [objects]... that we encounter for the first time immediately have a spiritual effect on us. A child, for whom every object is new, experiences the world in this way: it sees light, is attracted by it, wants to grasp it, burns its finger in the process, and thus learns fear and respect for the flame. And then it learns that light has not only an unfriendly, but also a friendly side: banishing darkness and prolonging the day, warming and cooking, delighting the eye. One becomes familiar with light by collecting these experiences and storing away this knowledge in the brain. [However, once one has this knowledge,] the powerful, intense interest in light vanishes, and its attribute of delighting the eye is met with indifference. Gradually, in this way, the world loses its magic.

In works like the one shown on this card, Tuttle seeks to bring back that magic, that sense of mystery, and to explore how and when we lost it—and what that loss means.

Richard Tuttle's work has been exhibited extensively worldwide and has had a significant influence on that of other artists. He lives and works in New Mexico and New York City.