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Genie in a Bottle: Tony Feher's Witty, Twisted Readymades
by Jane Harris
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John Cage once wittily wrote, "Say it's not a Duchamp. Turn it over and it is," and these days, thanks to Warhol, Duchamp's legacy is as commonplace as his readymades. But not every artist sees in the refuse of the everyday the kind of humble beauty Tony Feher does. Since his early "scatter art" days, Feher has assembled materials most would ignore—bottles, string, cleaning fluid, marbles, lightbulbs, crates, and tinfoil—into post-minimal sculptures that are as formal as they are whimsical. These often fragile configurations never completely alchemize their materials because it is the simple magic of the ordinary—a marble being just a marble—that Feher is after. The title of his current show, "The Wart on the Bosom of Mother Nature," may seem wryly at odds with such a sensibility, but it conveys Feher's desire to reveal just how connected the ordinary and the beautiful really are. In one piece he punches holes into variously sized foil snack bags, which he then turns inside out and hangs on the wall. What we litter our sofas and sidewalks with suddenly become precious silver vessels that glow with red, orange, and yellow. Similarly, in Mountain Home, he stacks 140 green plastic strawberry baskets, bottoms up, into a luminous pyramid structure. One of the best works on display, #2, is made from yet another food-related item, one you could easily smuggle out of a cafeteria and install at home. Featuring 16 polystyrene food trays in black, white, and creamy yellow, laid in pairs on the floor, it's reminiscent of a Carl Andre (and, oddly, houndstooth plaid), but the trays remain what they are: functional, ephemeral objects—beautiful just the same.