

# Tom Bendtsen

(Canada / USA)

## **an Artist's Statement**

My work is motivated by our relationship to our innovations, our fascination with these innovations and how they shape culture and the way we think.

I am also interested in human endeavor in instinctual terms. Speculating about the natural impulses that have changed, through countless evolutions and contact with extraneous influences, to become the drivers that currently power and possess us.

By incorporating flaws or hidden contrasts into seemingly stable, confident, systems, my hope is to present a more humble view of our activities as super animals within nature.

## **Books in Works**

One of my fascinations, from the beginning, has been with how meaning is created, in us and by us. Thinking about how reading is different than speaking, painting, whistling, walking,... and how exposure to these varied information modes shapes our brains and the way we think. Books have always contained a great deal more than their literal content. They are technology, of privilege; fixed in the moment they were created, and represent indoctrination in addition to enlightening. I have used books in works since 1990. I began creating structures after an experience I had with a censorship issue relating to an exhibition I was in. I was fascinated with how well each side of the debate constructed very reasonable arguments to support their position. I began to think about how we all



**Conversation #2 (2008)** *This work was concerned with creating imagery: the books were being used as*

have access to the same knowledge, yet we construct, by selective reasoning, opposing points of view. So I set about trying to construct structures that represented arguments in some way. Solid, fragile, dependent on history and immovable. The earlier works, *Arguments*, involved obsessively ordering books by subject. History and connections between titles was the indexing method used. The structure, space and content of the books used worked together to create an over-all artwork.

*pixels to create an over-all image effect. Any historical connections between books are left to chance. 10,000 books*

This changed with *Argument #4(b)*, where I began playing with imagery. The most recent book towers, *Conversations*, are more concerned with the creation of well-defined surface images. Now the book colors are being used as pixels to create an over-all image effect. Any intriguing connections between books are left to chance (a detective novel and a university text on accounting could share a cover color, say blue, and find themselves side by side). The hidden scenes and material in the gaps are

meant to create lateral lines of meaning. They relate to the structure, color or location.

*Players.* When I entered Grad school in 2001 I began by attempting to shred, and roll into cigarettes, every book I was to read while at school. Stimulating, addictive and potentially dangerous. This project lasted 3 months, and involved 8 books.

The following text accompanied the work *Book Hawk*, shown at the University of Toronto. U of T has a historical authority that is necessary for this work to be realized.

## **Book Hawk**

*Mixed media with thesaurus*

*Hart House, University of Toronto*

*The Book Hawk is a protector, maintaining a claim, concerned with its place and its time. This predator patrols its territory; a location with a historical authority that is undeniable, a place where the maintaining of that history and its traditions, requires a degree of control.*

*Considered largely docile, the Book Hawk, when challenged, can become uncompromising and aggressive. With its complex support structure and constant power supply it can overwhelm its newer, more virile challengers with little effort. Caution is recommended.*

## **Education**

*2003 Master's of Fine Arts, State University of New York, Buffalo, USA*

*1991 AOCAD Diploma, Ontario College of Art and Design, Toronto, Canada*

An interview with

## Tom Bendtsen

### What in your opinion defines a work of art?

It should contain one or both of all of the following: innovation of its moment in history, the societal and/or philosophical zeitgeist of the time it was created. This information is better expressed with poetics, not just illustrated.

**You have formal training and you have received MFA, from State University of New York. How much in your opinion does training influence art? And how has your art developed since you left school?**

I believe my educational experience definitely had an impact on my work and my understanding of art. You are forced to confront ideas, opinions and methodologies that you may not come in contact with outside the institutional setting. Even railing against something helps you to understand yourself. The most significant benefit of my formal training was contact with peers. Community within this kind of educational experience is where most of the learning occurs. This is the real incubator of the Art School environment in my view. My work has come into clearer focus since I finished my education. I understand myself a lot better. Having said that, many of the themes and ideas remain un-changed since long before I ever learned how to analyze my own methods and motivations.

**You are a multidisciplinary artist: your art ranges from drawing and painting to video, installations and performances. How do you choose a particular media for your works? And what technical aspects do you mainly focus on in your work?**

Process and material bring content. Every project/series involves a new set of technical



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requirements, often leading to new learning. I had never done any drawing until about 10 years ago, then an idea I wanted to execute required that I learn. I can confidently say that I am now technically proficient in this area. Similarly, if the book structures are not immaculate, they simply don't work, can easily look messy. The consistency, and I guess you could call this technique as well, lies in the motivations behind these works.

**In the first line of your artist's statement, we can read that your work is motivated by our relationship to our innovations and how they shape culture and the way we think.**

**We would like to ask you if in your opinion Art could play a role in social questions, steering people's behaviour.**

That statement relates more to the instinctual roots of our industriousness. What basic need is being mined, changed or satisfied with each new innovation. I do believe art has and can lead societal change, the Situationist Interna-



**Conversation #4 (c)** The form was influenced by a nuclear cooling tower.

tionals role in the student up-rising in Paris 1968 comes to mind. Much of the Post Modern movement sought social change.

It is, however, a tricky proposition. Delivering topical content directly through visual art can lead to dreadful work.

We also have the problem of relevance to the larger culture. Visual art does not hold the same cultural significance, in a populist sense, that it did before modernism. We aren't the only show in town any more.

**Do you think that there's a "contrast" between tradition and contemporary?**

Well don't the innovations of the 'contemporary' through history eventually become consumed by tradition? The autobiographical

and experiential work we see today seems a natural extension of what has been building over the past 200 years. Even before then it seems to me that Art was, and always has been, in a state of flux? I would suggest even 'traditional technique', in all media, evolved through the technological and intellectual change of its time.

**An interesting series that we have had the chance to get to know is entitled "Conversation #4"**

**Tell us something about your inspiration for these creations. Can you describe a little bit about your creative process?**

With all these works I am trying to reconcile or contrast a number of relatable ideas at once. With *Conversation #4* I first became interested in the over-all form of a nuclear cooling tower, menacing and beautiful in the landscape.

I then began thinking of what imagery would be provocative in combination with this form: a tree in nature. This contrast is challenging, yet open. Yes nuclear technology threatens nature, our long term future, but it also allows for 'clean' energy (in the short term anyway) avoiding other possibly more damaging ways of producing power.

That's how it began. As I am always looking to introduce contrast, flaws, and subtext into a work, the hidden scenes between the book gaps further complicate the reading of this work. Men mining coal and logging, mushrooms sprouting from religious and legal texts and a snowman meeting a polar bear are all hidden, except for those who take the time to investigate. When I begin to build the creation of the surface imagery is loosely planned, but is resolved as I build, one book at a time.



*Back of Conversation #2, under construction*

***This might sound some funny, I remind the words of my first Art teacher, who used to tell us about Filippo Brunelleschi, one of the foremost architects and engineers of the Italian Renaissance.***

***He used to weight every single brick of his buildings... I can recognize a particular attention also in your structures: randomness seems have little importance, in your process isn't it?***

The early book works, *Arguments*, were desperately trying to make order, (the performative part of these works) in an overwhelming sea of potential knowledge. I was trying to make links between subjects and create structures that reflected the idea of history being built upon history. With the second book structure series, *Conversations*, a system was

devised to allow for randomness. By using colour over subject as an indexing method, these works threw the content of the books into random relationships. A blue book can be an accounting book, can be a self help book can be a romance novel. Random connections of subject was the goal. Conversations over arguments.

***When viewing your book constructions I am reminded of Marshal McLuhan's most famous quote: "The medium is the message". We would go as far as to say that your buildings series are meta-art, since the nature of the medium: would you agree with this statement?***

Yes, to a degree, this work is very much about art and being human. I do believe the book



**Conversation #5** *Stands 8ft tall, contains 6,000 books.*

reading and writing has a complicated relationship/history in the visual arts. Part of my initial interest in using books came from my experience as an undergraduate at OCAD in Toronto. French theory, deconstruction and semiotics were very much in vogue at that time. All very interesting, what I understood of it, to a young artist hopeful.

I began to question its prominence within the department I was working. It seemed to me that many students began 'writing' their work. Critiques were full of literal, connect the dots approach to creating meaning. In many ways I was trying to find a way of incorporating these ideas without them overwhelming a work. Nothing, it seemed to me, could be absolutely understood. I began

yo look for lateral lines of meaning. A directed yet open endedness in my work

***Do you think that art could act as a substitute for traditional learning, in a process in which active learning could be carried out through experience ?***

Yes..., or at least in combination.

The studio/critique environment provides a broader, more complicated interaction for the student, less linear than traditional learning. Sometimes we need to understand history, research and approach information logically, as an individual.

I use experiential learning when I teach. Rather than talk about the importance of context or performance, why not surprise the student with a site-specific performance piece as a demonstration which is what I have done. We have a complicated information intake system we humans. Sometimes, because it's easier I guess, we privilege reason, literalness, when we naturally take in and store all kinds of information simultaneously. Feeling is believing!

**Argument #5** *The texts become more superficial towards the top, in contrast to the idea of accention*





Book Hawk in motion

**Since you produce videos, there's a question that we would like to submit you: in these last years we have seen that the frontier between Video Art and Cinema is growing more and more vague.**

**Do you think that this "frontier" will exist longer?**

I think it will continue to exist. Yes Video has killed the cinema star to a degree, removed some of its elitism.

But as soon as experimental techniques are absorbed by the mainstream, counter culture will find new ways to bring forth unexpected ways of producing imagery.

Perhaps slow will become hot? As our senses begin to wear out from over-stimulation?



Conversation # 4

**Speaking of Arguments you have said that "they appear solid but in fact are not; they are stacked and on the verge of collapse": this reminds me another kind of ancient ephemeral artworks, Sand Mandala: what's your point about this?**

Yes, I do see some similarity. Both have a transitory way about them.

Fragility is in contrast to the solid appearance of these book structures, the closer you get to them, the softer they become.

For me, more so earlier in my thinking about this work, the possibility of collapse seemed a necessary counter to the authority of the structures, the books and what those books represent. A definitiveness fixed in a culture that is fluid.



Argument #2 10,000 books. Interior walls consist of text you would read in private, exterior publicly acceptable texts. 1997

**Thank you very much for this interview, Tom: what's next for you? What are your upcoming projects?**

My newest work **Migration Time** observes the beech trees movement north into, and possible through southern Ontario Canada. The current projected ranges anticipate that a warmer climate will have significant effect on our forests and the migration of Beech trees in particular. Deciduous forests will move northward and into to higher elevations, replacing coniferous forests in many areas. Estimates project that by the end of this century, this deciduous tree species will move entirely out of the USA into central Ontario and Quebec. (Research provided by Geophysical Fluid Dynamics Laboratory and Goddard Institute for Space Studies).

**Migration Time** involves, displaying, via live web cam, a large projection of a forest vista near Haliburton, Ontario, Canada. Of course the actual tree migration is so slow as to be virtually imperceptible, virtually nothing would change during the exhibition. I am interested in the contrast of immediacy (a cultural obsession, reflected in my use of technology) with a slower, imperceptible time-line (the unseen adaptations and movements of nature). The relatively rapid movement of these trees remains so slow to be felt and therefore, is not considered culturally significant. Or can't be truly perceived in a culture that is accelerating and obsessed with efficiency. The newest book work, **Conversation #5**, will be displayed a number of times this year.

<http://www.tombendtsen.com/conversation-5.html>

I also am working on new series of drawings, **Wishing Well** series, an extension of other drawing series to date. <http://www.tombendtsen.com/wishing-well.html>