
cambridge galleries

Tom Bendtsen

Argument #6 (b)

Cambridge Galleries Public Art Program 2002

Interview with Cambridge Galleries' curator Gordon Hatt on January 10, & March 12, 2002

GH. I'm interested in how the book works started. Maybe you could talk a little bit about that.

TB. It was in Montreal, when I was part of a show called "Systems of Exchange" in 1994. It was a cultural exchange between cities – a way of bringing together these two cultural centres of Canada. What ended up happening was that people started to parade and canvas around an issue of censorship and this idea of community started to break down. We started to fight with each other, and then within our city groups we started to fight amongst each other about titles and contents and it just all broke down.

After that I started thinking about this work. We're all influenced by and we all have access to the same information, and yet we're able to construct vastly different ideas and arguments. So I was thinking of the arbitrary nature of 'conclusion making,' or having opinions, or making arguments. It's not entirely arbitrary, but can seem to be. Whatever your emotional state at the moment, you can find a way of justifying it through common knowledge or academic texts. I started thinking about collecting a large group of books that represented knowledge – my knowledge, knowledge I had access to – and then just started compiling them into different structures that represented ideas, monuments to ideas. You can take knowledge and construct any argument you want based on what you want. And I also like the idea that when they're done they're fixed. They're heavy and they're immovable. They're made up of little parts, but they're immovable once they're completed. They're also fragile.

So that was of the genesis of the work, and that's why I built the wall, the first piece I did. It was a house – a wall blocking off part of my studio limiting 'potential' for myself (*Argument #2*, 1997). On the outside of the house were academic texts (more presentable) and on the inside there were Readers Digest condensed novels, Hardy Boys, "how-to" books, more 'home' and 'comfort' books – maybe the types of books you wouldn't want anyone to see, or know what you read in private.

At Mercer Union (*Argument #3*,1997) I built a column mainly of art and culture texts, and the idea of that was that a specific kind of history was keeping the ceiling from falling in. In the exhibition "Canadian Shield," (*Argument #4*, 1998) I built a cave, which was a little more ambiguous, but I think one of my more successful book works. You walked inside and it went up about 14 feet all around you and you felt like you had walked into a cave, or maybe even a cathedral. The power of the physical space – that was the main thing. The content wasn't as specific. It was more architectural.

The piece at Southern Alberta Art Gallery was monolithic (*Argument #5*, 2000). It represented art in all its majesty. If you went around to the back there was a little staircase. My thinking was that it was like the 'Wizard of Oz' – pomp and circumstance, showmanship, and then if you knew how to get in the back, there's this little staircase . . .

And finally this piece in Cambridge, which is the idea of ascension through knowledge, but contrasted by the content of the books, which become more superficial as you climb up. It appears as ascension through knowledge, but I'm contrasting that very utopian ideal with contents that reflect the contrary.

I was also thinking at this stage about cultural entropy, the fact that culturally we're casting out subtlety all the time. I'll use a flu virus as an analogy. The genetic makeup of the flu bug has, say 100 parts to it, and as it divides it loses some of those parts – maybe 5% as it grows and expands out into the human population. As it loses some of its genetic material it reproduces quicker and spreads faster. It learns that it doesn't need all its genetic material. It speeds up as it is able to transmit into the population until it reaches the point where it doesn't have enough genetic material left to reproduce because it's cast off so much.

The same thing exists in nature, where certain trees flourish in a forest. They're able to kill off other trees and plant life and they grab more sunlight and more of the water. But then at a certain point that tree is isolated and it doesn't have the other plant life and other bug life to sustain it. Then it will also die. It is a condition in nature of speeding up and casting out the unnecessary or the subtle detail.

I'm thinking about this pattern as it relates to world culture. Things are speeding up at an incredible rate, jettisoning extra languages and traditions and habits and cultural patterns. In this piece I'm including the idea of ascension, but the texts are becoming more and more simple.

GH. I think people tend to believe that more information makes you smarter, and the more information you have, the better the decision you will be able to make. Well informed

combatants or debaters can at some point shed their prejudices and come to a rational solution. In a similar way, there's a general feeling that there's more and more information all the time – we live in a more and more complex world. But what you're telling me is almost the opposite of those two very things: The volume of information we have makes no difference.

TB. I agree that knowledge and education is a good thing – tolerance and understanding of other cultures is good for us. But if you look at the Internet, which is supposedly the way that everyone has access to knowledge, access to all the libraries, it seems to me that it has become just another television now for the advertisers. I don't think it necessarily follows that because there is more information, or access to it, that we become better educated. Maybe the only information is Corporate America's version – the diversity of opinion being essentially lost.

GH. What do you think of the books as 'objects.' You're working with books, it's the material you use, the building blocks signifiers in a way, but there seems to be a fetish for the books themselves.

TB. I like the idea that I can't reach them when they're in one of these things. It may seem juvenile, my resistance to knowledge, but it's also a caution. I've got this cigarette rolling machine and every time I read a book I take the cover off and I shred the book (I had to have read it all) and I roll it into cigarettes.

GH. They're just paperbacks?

TB. Well, yeah, I could take a hard cover off as well and just be left with the pages, so that at the end of my two years (at the State University of New York in Buffalo) I'm going to have a series of shelves displaying the cigarettes with the book covers and however many cigarettes the content rolled into will be displayed along side. I guess there's addiction consumption in the form of a cigarette, and it's also a way of not taking it all too seriously. I want the knowledge. I want to understand, but at the same time to make sure, I add a bit of caution to the process.

GH. Do you ever encounter people who find what you do with books offensive?

TB. Absolutely. Not many people have seen the cigarette work yet, but some have said even the stacking of the books is disrespectful.

GH. . . . you should donate them to a library?

TB. Actually, someone said exactly that a couple of years ago.

GH. Even since the time I first saw one of your book works, my attitude toward books has changed. Because of the Internet, the way we very often get information now is digital as opposed to printed text.

TB. There's a nostalgic quality to books. Where they used to carry information, now they're old fashioned and you cuddle up by a fire with them.

GH. Book publishers are spending more time to make the book a more attractive object – making the cover art and the actual handling of the book more appealing. The book becomes an art object.

TB. There's a nostalgic quality to the dying medium. Film is similar to books in that there's this bit of information that's readable – it's right there in front of you. It's not abstract (like digital text). It doesn't appear to you all of a sudden on a screen. There's something about that hard technology that's appealing to me. Film is sculptural to me – it's a physical thing.

GH. As opposed to video?

TB. Exactly. Video is just a series of electronic data. I was recently asked if I would consider myself a Luddite.

GH. A Luddite?

TB. Yeah, because of this nostalgic approach to technology. I had never thought of it that way. But I don't think I am.

GH. Where does your interest in science come from? You are able to talk very animatedly about science and find metaphors and parallels in it.

TB. I guess it's similar to art in that it involves abstract thought. Like people sitting around their rooms or studios and coming up with crazy ideas and then trying to illustrate them. I see it as quite similar.

GH. Okay, let's just start from the beginning – just the program of *Argument #6(b)*.

TB. This is the sixth in the Argument series and the basic idea was that there is a limited amount of knowledge that I have access to and these books represent that knowledge – a sort of a Western Canadian's history. It's about me trying to make sense and organize all that history and all the information that is accessible to me. So this is an attempt, as the other configurations are, to make ideas physical – like the idea of ascension. Others pieces I have done have dealt with the history of contemporary art, personal reading histories as opposed to, public versus private reading histories. This one is about ascension, or the illusion of ascension through progress and knowledge. There is a general historical gradation in all of them. The foundation of our knowledge is often in the legal system and religious beliefs very loosely associated. That's the base. As we climb up we get into more academic texts and more science, (again) our legal and scientific belief systems. It starts to dissipate into psychology as we come out of the academic texts into the humanities. Over on this side it is more literature based, and around here we have more art and contemporary ideas of art. On the other side maybe we have a Canada rising out of a British tradi-

tion. Here it's not exactly linear, but we have a lot of British legal texts (supporting) Canadian legal texts and then these books here are journals of consumer products and marketing strategies and then we come up into Canadian business, *Anne of Green Gables*, the Canadian Free Trade Agreement, Norman Bethune, *In Flanders Fields*, *The Klondike* by Pierre Berton, W. O. Mitchell . . .

GH. So this is the Can-Lit section?

TB. Yes, and it has a historical gradation up into Carol Shields and John Ralston Saul near the top before we get into this layer here which is the Readers Digest Condensed novels. That is for me the cut off point where all the stuff below it has become homogenized into a pop culture framework or has become regurgitated. So above we have the Readers Digest, then we have the Hardy Boys which again is colour. A lot of it has do with colour as well. The legal texts and the Bible are heavier so it makes sense for them also to go on the bottom just for practical building purposes. But then similar to the base, the Readers Digest novels reflect a new beginning – the homogenization of these more critical texts or texts we take more seriously. Above the Readers Digest we get into autobiographies (Shelly Winters), popular fictions (*Jurassic Park*), different sports figures, biographies and we move up into more pulp fiction. As we ascend we get into trashier novels, fantasy novels and romance novels. We have heavier, denser content moving up into a lighter content. There is an idea of ascension built by this piece that seems to be swirling upward but it is actually contrasted by the content of the books where they become lighter in their content as they ascend. There is a euphoric, progressive feeling you may get from this piece originally, but if you look at it closer, as it ascends, it dies out.

GH. So when you are constructing this obviously you have an idea that this section for example is Canadiana, and then this is literature, and then this is art, chemistry, statistics etc.

TB. The more I build these things the more organized the books become. The categories weave into each other a little bit sometimes. I'm not following a specific content structure from bottom to top. But it does still reflect that legal text into academic text into that acceptable older respected literature, more modern philosophy up into Camille Paglia, *How to be a Good Secretary* and *What About Men*. There is a little feminist thing right there, so there are little pockets of other things as well that are outside of the larger areas of focus.

GH. There is something terribly Hegelian about this whole thing. The end of history starting with religion and law, moving through art and then ending in philosophy.

TB. There you go. And my ending is pop culture.

GH. And here along the steps . . .

TB. Well here we have a Bible, then we have British legal history, then we have Canadian legal history.

GH. So this is a reiteration of the overall . . .

TB. Yeah. We move up step by step. Here, all the encyclopaedias are in one spot. There is a colour choice made as well. You know, the red looks nice beside the green of the consumer charter and the blue of the "Protect Yourself." It's a futile effort to actually try and make sense of all the available history, so at times I'm just trying to place them aesthetically – to order all of these texts specifically as they relate to each other and myself would be virtually an impossible feat. Here's a bit of rock history – *Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds*, *Elvis & Me*, *No One Gets Out of Here Alive*, *His Way: An Autobiography of Frank Sinatra* . . .

GH. I'm interested in the fact that as you're building it, you're going around in a circle so you keep coming back to sections that you're working on.

TB. Maybe they connect as much this way (laterally) as up and down.

GH. The more I talk to you about it, the more fascinating I find your engagement with the books, your feeling from the books and also the personal way you approach it in terms of Western Canadian history.

TB. My bias is included in it right? To construct some utopian, fair world view would be wrong. This is my bias. It's about my history and that's the only place I can speak from. □

Tom Bendtsen, *Argument #6 (b)*, 2002, approx. 8,000 books, 2.1 m (base diameter) x 3.5 m (height).

Tom Bendtsen calls his book works "arguments." Inspired by the way disagreement and debate can be constructed from an individual body of knowledge, Bendtsen has set out to give a tangible, physical character to the basis and personal construction of argument.

Initially, his book works may seem to be simply a pile of books, skillfully arranged to create a sculptural, architectural form. Upon closer inspection, however, one identifies the titles of the books, the different types of books, the relationship of the books placed side by side, and one on top of the other, as the foundation, structure and metaphor of a body of knowledge.

The installation of Argument #6 (b) *took place from January 8 through 12, 2002 in the foyer of Cambridge Libraries and Galleries, Queen's Square. Approximately 8,000 books were used in its construction. Initially, the work was built to measure approximately 2.1 metres in diameter at the base by 3.5 metres high. Since its construction it has shrunk close to 20 centimetres due to settling and dehumidification.* Argument #6 (b) *is on exhibition until November 2002 as part of Cambridge Galleries' 2002 Public Art Program.*

Tom Bendtsen was born in 1965 in Copenhagen, Denmark and grew up in Victoria, BC. He received degrees from Camosun College in Victoria, and from the Ontario College of Art and Design in Toronto, where he currently resides. Bendtsen has recently shown his book works at the Koffler Gallery, Toronto; Hamilton Artists Inc., Hamilton; and at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery in Lethbridge, Alberta. GH

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