

Tom Bendtsen: Argument #4(b)

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Sandra Dyck, Curator

Carleton University Art Gallery



Onward #3, detail

Preface

A monumental tower of books that enclosed an interior landscape — titled *Argument #4(b)* — and a larger-than-life frosty statue of a man made of refrigerator coils — called *Onward #3* — dominated Tom Bendtsen’s exhibition at the Carleton University Art Gallery. From their titles, indirectly alluding to the operations of reason and progress, it would seem that Bendtsen’s works were made to measure for the university environment. And so they were, not because they fulfilled such expectations in any obvious way, but because they exposed the delicate balance required to create “clearer’, ‘fairer’ vantage points from which to make order,” as the artist puts it in a statement on his practice.

In fact, the exhibition was not without its adventures. Unlike the marble it outwardly resembled (from a distance), *Onward #3* depended on technical refrigeration calculations to maintain its solid appearance; when these turned out to need adjustment — initially the sculpture failed to freeze

— a refrigeration specialist worked with the artist to make last-minute modifications. Such unexpected events underline the partnership between the art gallery and the contemporary artist. The finish and permanence which, until the Impressionists, could more or less be taken for granted are, for many artists today, provisional states to be negotiated in their pursuit of meaning on terms appropriate today. Any art gallery committed to contemporary art – and the Carleton University Art Gallery is most definitely one of these – is prepared to work alongside the artist to help realize his vision.

We welcome the long-awaited publication of this catalogue, which carries forward the arguments and conundrums initiated by Bendtsen's works. Petra Halkes's detailed reading of the exhibition in the accompanying essay situates the artist provocatively at a point of reconciliation between the postmodern emphasis on the social construction of culture and socio-biological arguments of necessity that extend to the cognitive and aesthetic spheres. Her essay deftly and suggestively traces Bendtsen's cultural affinities, from

archaic Greek Kouroi to Don Quixote, concluding that the uncertainties the artist introduces into his work oblige us to take “a more humble view of humanness.”

I wish to thank all those involved in the exhibition and this catalogue, particularly curator Sandra Dyck, whose intuitive amazement at Bendtsen's constructions led to the exhibition, and Patrick Côté, who has approached the catalogue design with both flair and understanding. Special thanks go to the artist, who offered gallery visitors a privileged opportunity to share in his quest for meaning in our ever-evolving world.

Diana Nemiroff

Director

Tom Bendtsen's Argument #4(b):
His Nature Includes Culture

Petra Halkes



BEVERLY
The Death Commission
THE TUNNEL
MAZE
THE BRETHREN | JOHN GRISHAM
CHICK TRACY
A WILD AND LONELY PLACE
PAULINA GREGORY
DOCTOR OF TALENT
ONE CANADA *** JOHN G. DIEFENBAKER
THE LIVES OF RACHEL
THE PROCESS OF DIVORCE
COLONY
GREG LEMOND'S BEVEELING
FREEFALL
JOHN DYSON
MATTER OF HONOR
Eugene Izzl
INFRA DIG
THE TROUBLE WITH A BAD FIT • CAPILLA T. GROSS
DOYNT DEAL FIVE DOLLARS
I'M NOT YOUR O
Avery Cor

One thing only do I know for certain and that is that man's judgements of value follow directly his wishes for happiness — that, accordingly, they are an attempt to support his illusions with arguments.¹

SIGMUND FREUD

Tom Bendtsen's tower of books, *Argument #4(b)*, almost reaches the Carleton University Art Gallery's nineteen-foot ceiling. The column looks utilitarian, a bit drab, even. The spines face inward, so the paper-beige of used books sets the tone. Here and there, bits of colour and letters show in the small gaps between books, but little can be read from the outside. The structure is hulled in a semi-darkness that befits the reject-status of the books; all 12,000 or so volumes are surpluses from public and private libraries and universities.

Having lost their original purpose and meaning, the unreadable books suggest the arbitrary nature of arguments. Whether we categorize our stories as fiction or non-fiction, as true or false, here values don't matter, for all narratives are shown to be as interchangeable as building bricks. The collective diversity of all these narratives adds up to a solidity that is illusory: *Argument #4(b)* is easily dismantled; Bendtsen has created different structures with his vast collection of books in the past, and will likely do so in the future. He even has two sets of books, one organized by subject and one

by colour, more than 26,000 volumes in all.

The works of this exhibition, which borrows its title *Argument #4(b)* from the book installation, are as varied in subject and media as the contents and shapes of the books. *Onward #3* is a sculpture of a larger-than-life-sized male figure built from refrigerator coils which are covered in ice. *Ground* is a DVD presentation that shows a rider and horse galloping back and forth across a field, and *Terminal* consists of nine framed drawings of hybrid bird/human creatures. Bendtsen draws in not just language, but all aspects of culture — art, religion, science, technology and philosophy — to show that the search to find new grounds for meaning is a human impulse that prods us all into an endless process of inventing, creating and arguing.

My exploration of the backsides, insides and undersides of the art works will show how his constructions deflate lofty arguments, while new ideas turn out to be old stories in new guises. Bendtsen mixes media and materials, and he freely quotes styles and historical beliefs; his playful

deconstructions of absolute truths mark him as a true post-modernist. Yet, as I will argue, his work implies that the human search for meaning is an intrinsic drive, hardwired into the brains of the human species.

A biological approach to human culture is perhaps best exemplified by Stephen Kellert's and Edward Wilson's "biophilia hypothesis", which holds that the cognitive, intellectual, aesthetic and spiritual interactions between human beings and the world arise from a biological necessity; human cultural impulses are as essential to the sustenance of human life as physical wellbeing is.² Ostensibly, such a universalist proposal goes against the grain of postmodern thinking about difference and the social construction of human culture. The polemical tone of arguments against postmodernism by many defenders of a socio-biological approach to culture and art affirms the divide between these intellectual positions.³ Bendtsen, however, correlates a biological approach to art making with the endless search for meaning in an intrinsically meaningless world, thereby



questioning the antithesis between biological and cultural constructivist positions, and opening up new grounds for a worn-out nurture/nature discourse.

Bendtsen's tower of books appears as an emblem of the cultural constructions that we create to shape our worlds. In the tower, as in the other works of the exhibition, countless references crowd each other out; each "brick" denies the possibility of ever getting to know an underlying, universal truth. The column of books offers commentary on a range of contemporary phenomena: the obsession with collecting and archiving, the archaic quality of books in a digital age, not to mention the piles of unread books on bedside tables all over the land. And this is just the outside. Hidden in the back of the structure, facing the wall, there is a corbelled-arch entrance, harking back to Mycenaean tombs. Step inside, and any sense of pressing present concerns fades; something else begins to happen.

We experience a total transformation of the tower in its secluded interior. Floor-mounted spotlights emit a raking

light across the books' colourful spines, evoking a cathedral sense of awe. Although the lights pick out a few titles (*The Ice Age*, *Waiting for the Wave*, *Faith and Fear*, *Blue Mountain*), the words are subsumed by an overwhelming sense of colour. It is as if we were inside a painting. Artists often feel that critics' interpretations colonize their works; here, in a witty reversal, the visual colonizes the discursive.

But don't let this witticism limit the work's meaning. There is more at stake. We move our eyes from the solid brown and black tomes at the bottom to a layer of grassy-green books, then upwards to spines in shades as blue as the sky. A landscape begins to appear, complete with white clouds and a red, setting sun. The landscape, set in this cathedral-like atmosphere, alludes to a Romantic veneration of nature. Many Romantics dreamt of "pure nature" as a higher order, indeed, a divine infinity in which the inadequate, time-bound human existence could be dissolved and redeemed.⁴ Here, Bendtsen shows idealized nature as a human construction built from an endless multiplicity of words and images.

The circular form of *Argument #4(b)*'s landscape reminds me of the painted panoramas of the nineteenth century. In many European and North American cities rotundas were built to house enormous circular paintings that presented heroic war scenes, Bible stories, colonial vistas, landscapes and cityscapes. Entrepreneurs travelled from city to city with these paintings so that a new and newsworthy scene could be shown at regular intervals; the panoramas were an early form of mass entertainment. In these panoramas — a number of which are still extant — demarcated viewing platforms situate the viewers right inside the picture. Doors, windows, and any other connections to the real world are screened out. The panoramas provide their viewers with a faux-transcendental, divine point of view, a whole world in the grasp of the eye.⁵

In *Argument #4(b)* we find ourselves in a shrunken panorama. There is no space for a viewing platform, and so we are free to move around and discover how this landscape is constructed. Here we are denied the god's-eye point of view and return to a medieval one, looking up in awe, as in a



cathedral. But what exactly do we see when we direct our gaze higher, over the edge of the wall of books? Not the stained-glass grandeur of the cathedral, nor a heavenly Tiepolo ceiling, or a wide expanse of sky. Hooked up to an electrical plug in the ceiling, within a circle of light emanating from the column, a tiny mechanical bird hangs upside down in its upside-down nest. As hatchlings do, it opens its beaks at intervals, wanting to be fed.

In the privileged space of the all-embracing view, above the more than 12,000 books filled with arguments, stories, poetics, reports, regulations and polemics, there is this tiny bird, incessantly wanting more. Drawing our attention to the creature's endless needs, *Argument #4(b)* proposes that people's ongoing search for meaning is a human drive on a par with a creature's need to be fed. The question then arises whether physical needs for food, water and shelter have to be met first before the need for meaning-making can be tended to.

Bendtsen's *Onward #3* is as much a physics demonstration as it is a sculpture, suggesting that physical and cultural



Bird's nest, *Argument #4(b)*



Onward #3

needs are as difficult to separate as body and mind. The larger-than-life-sized male figure is shaped with copper coils that were filled with refrigeration coolant and frozen with the aid of two compressors. The condensation from the air causes a thick layer of ice to form on most of the coils' surfaces. Some coils — the head, the left calf, and a few ribs — remain bare, not by intent, but rather, by failure of technique. The figure that appears is like a parody of the Western tradition of the male nude in sculpture.

This tradition of sculpting a single figure reaches back so far in Western history that it seems natural to us. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz has remarked, however, that the representation of the human body as a separate, self-contained entity, disconnected from others and free from its environment, is in fact a “rather peculiar idea of rare occurrence in all but Western culture.”⁶ In *Onward #3*, Bendtsen's figure seems emblematic of Western values of autonomy and independence. The figure, his head held high, his posture stiff and straight, one foot slightly in front of the other, arms

hanging by his side, recalls the Archaic Greek Kouroi of the seventh century B.C. Although the Kouroi showed the influence of older Egyptian relief figures, they were freed from a supporting background. Frozen in their idealized beauty, the sculptures were the first to present human figures as discrete, self-contained entities. Rising above lowly nature, they form a beginning of the Western exaltation of autonomous humanness.

Onward #3 retains traces of the Kouroi as well as of Descartes's mechanistic concept of the body. Descartes's high hopes that science would make a better machine of the body still resonate today. While the advancements of science and medicine over the last three centuries are difficult to deny, the objectification of the body and of nature that empirical science demands has skewed our thinking into a persistent dualism of body and mind, nature and culture. Nature, in Western thinking, is something to overcome or, at least, to be refined by culture. Bendtsen's delicately blown glass tubes that guide the melting ice with precision into a bottle

below form an ironic, mechanical "improvement" on squashy, bloody intestines. *Onward #3*'s clean look (the white, shiny ice-crystals), the military/Christian reference in its title *Onward* (Christian Soldiers!), and its steadfast stance allude to the goal-directedness of war, to linear progress, and to the single-mindedness that have all been high values in Western culture. Bendtsen undercuts these ideals by using a cheap plastic bottle to catch the water, suggesting that, in the end, all that this machine/body produces is a *drip*. As for its self-containment, the ice man's backside contraptions, compressors, electrical wires and copper coils suggest that we are simply trying to substitute the bonds of technology for the bonds of nature.

In *Ground*, the overlay of one myth by another is underlined by Bendtsen's layering of media. He shot the film in Super-8 first, and then subjected it to an intentional process of deterioration. More than a comment on the rapid obsolescence of new media, the resulting degenerated image levels the distinctions between man and horse. The blur that moves



across the field from one side to the other can barely be identified as horse and rider. Movement is perceived before form is recognized and sets up a strange equivalence between anything that moves in this picture. What must be trees in the background metamorphose into windmills, or, perhaps, giants brandishing sticks.

Indeed, *Ground* can be read as a re-staging, in pixels, of Don Quixote's hallucinations, providing a fresh view of Cervantes's centuries-old satire. Don Quixote interpreted his world strictly according to the chivalry books he so admired, resulting in hilarious delusions. But when Quixote finally returns to the reality of home, the story ends; the author declares that no more tales can be recovered about the Don. This suggests that it was Don Quixote's imagination that kept him alive, or at least made his life worth re-telling.

In *Ground* Bendtsen reminds us that the present world continues to be shaped by our own imaginations, through ever-changing inventions, artistic and otherwise. He sees the drive to give meaning to our world as a human need, as vital

as other, physical needs, even if the truths that our imaginations conjure up are bound to be overlaid with other truths.

Bendtsen returns to the equation of physical and mental needs in *Terminal*, a series of nine drawings of diminutive human/bird hybrids. In each of the drawings, which consist of photocopy transfers embellished with graphite and colouring pencils, we see an upside-down creature with a squawking bird's head, with claws holding firmly on to a branch. Bendtsen differentiates the human part of each creature with clothes, shopping bags or other accoutrements, as if to show their individual obsessions and desires. Unidentifiable objects of desire — delicate squiggles, simple forms — float at the bottom of each drawing, forever out of reach of bird or human. *Terminal* suggests that, no matter which direction we follow, *upward* (as in the tower of books), *forward* (as in the man of ice), or endlessly back and forth (like the horseman), an abiding impulse to make sense of life leaves us terminally hanging. To be human means to be caught in an endless search for meaning.



Terminal 1-9, detail

Bendtsen's work, though leavened with humour, takes a rather dark view of culture as an inescapable human drive. His discontent, arguably, is not caused by the drive for meaning itself, but rather by the tendency to take illusions for final truths. For why couldn't the need to make art, to create meaning, to play, be as pleasurable as our other needs that are just as inescapable — our needs for eating, drinking, sleeping and sex? Indeed, there is an undercurrent of passion and fun in Bendtsen's work, even if it warns of the folly and dire consequences of human presumptions of final knowledge and meaning.

Freud's pessimistic *Civilization and its Discontents*, from which I borrowed my opening quotation, resonates in Bendtsen's work. Yet there is an important difference between Freud's analysis of culture and Bendtsen's staging of the endless human search for meaning. Freud's idea of civilization, focussed as it is on restraint or sublimation of physical needs, is oppositional to nature. While he recognizes the animal nature of the human species, he views civilization as

separating the human species from the animals in an *overcoming* of nature. The inescapable tragedy in Freud's theory is that civilization can only be a veneer, too easily broken to reveal the human's true animal nature. In Bendtsen's natural view of culture on the other hand, civilization is not a sublimation or a repressive cover, but a vital impulse that comes as naturally to a thinking species as nest-building does to birds.

Bendtsen's work prods us into taking a more humble view of humanness, in which our thinking skills are on a par with the specialized skills of other creatures on this earth. He levels the human/animal divide and hints that our uniquely human skill for shaping the world according to our imagination brings with it a great responsibility. Re-opening a discourse that has been made unpopular by antithetical nurture/nature debates, Bendtsen shows that a biological view of culture does not preclude postmodernist insights into the human construction of meaning. His nature includes culture.



Dr. Petra Halkes is an independent curator, painter, and art critic in Ottawa. She has written many catalogue essays as well as reviews and articles for art magazines such as *Border Crossings*, *Canadian Art* and *Parachute*, and is the author of *Aspiring to the Landscape, On Painting and the Subject of Nature*, published by the University of Toronto Press in 2006.

Notes

1. Sigmund Freud (1929), *Civilization and its Discontents*, translated and edited by James Strachey (New York/London: W.W. Norton, 1961), 111.
2. Stephen R. Kellert and Edward O. Wilson, editors, *The Biophilia Hypothesis* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1993).
3. See for instance, Ellen Dissanayake, *Homo Aestheticus, Where Art Comes From and Why* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992).
4. Robert Rosenblum, in *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition, Friedrich to Rothko* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), writes on page 14 that the Romantic veneration of nature took on a religious character, “as if the mysteries of religion had left the rituals of church and synagogue and had been relocated in the natural world.”
5. Stephan Oettermann, *The Panorama, History of a Mass Medium*, translated by Deborah Lucas Schneider (New York: Zone Books, 1997). Oettermann provides a list of still-existing panoramas on pages 346-347. The only Canadian panorama is the *Cyclorama of Jerusalem with the Crucifixion of Christ*, painted by Paul Philippoteaux, at Sainte-Anne-de-Baupré, Québec.
6. Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge, Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 59.



Onward #3, detail

Works in the exhibition

Ground (2001)

Super-8 film, transfer to SVHS, transfer to digital, transfer to VHS, transfer to digital

Argument #4(b) (2004)

12,000 books, mechanical bird, nest (grass, straw, twigs, feathers, electric car door lock), motion detector, lights

Onward #3 (2004)

Steel display units, copper coil, copper tubing, compressors, condensers, plastic catch basin, blown glass tubing, water bottle

Terminal 1 to 9 (2004)

Nine drawings, each photocopy transfer, graphite and coloured pencil on paper

Biography of the artist

Tom Bendtsen was born in Copenhagen, Denmark in 1965. He lives and works in Toronto.

EDUCATION

- 2003 Master's of Fine Arts, State University of New York, Buffalo
- 1991 AOCAD Diploma, Ontario College of Art and Design, Toronto
- 1986 Diploma in Visual Arts, Camosun College, Victoria

SELECTED SOLO AND TWO-PERSON EXHIBITIONS

- 2007 *Blung*, Nanaimo Regional Art Gallery, British Columbia
- 2004 *Argument #4(b)*, Carleton University Art Gallery, Ottawa (catalogue)
- 2003 *Conversation at Lockwood*, Lockwood Memorial Library, State University of New York, Buffalo (brochure)

- 2002 *Argument #6(b)*, Cambridge Galleries, Ontario (brochure)
- 2002 *Ampersand*, Open Space, Victoria (two-person; brochure)
- 2001 *Babel*, Koffler Centre of the Arts, Toronto (two-person; brochure)
- 2001 *Obsessive Behavior 4*, Hamilton Artists Inc., Ontario (brochure)
- 2001 *Industrious*, Bus Gallery, Toronto
- 2000 *Argument #5*, Southern Alberta Art Gallery, Lethbridge (catalogue)
- 1997 *Spidersense #1*, Mercer Union, Toronto (brochure)

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2007 Croatian Minute Film Festival, Požega, Croatia
- 2007 International Videofestival Bochum, Bochum, Germany
- 2007 Naoussa International Short Film and Video Festival, Naoussa, Greece
- 2007 Short Film Market, Clermont-Ferrand Film Festival, Clermont-Ferrand, France

- 2006 Hart House Installation Collective (hic), Site-specific interventions at the University of Toronto
- 2005 *Queen Street Garage Sale*, Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, Toronto
- 2005 *A Garden of Forked Paths*, The Rooms Provincial Art Gallery, St. John's (catalogue)
- 2003 *24/48*, Burchfield-Penney Art Center, Buffalo State College, New York
- 2003 *Grounds for Sculpture*, International Sculpture Center, Hamilton, New Jersey
- 2002 *In Western New York 2002*, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York (catalogue)
- 2000 Red Head Gallery, Toronto
- 1999 *Contact '99*, Bus Gallery, Toronto

GRANTS

Canada Council for the Arts

- Emerging artist (2000, 1998)
- Film and video for artists (2001)
- Mid-career (2002)

Ontario Arts Council

- Chalmers Arts Fellowship (2005)
- Emerging artist (2001, 1999)
- Exhibition assistance (2005, 2004, 2002, 2001, 2000, 1999, 1998)
- Mid-career (2005)
- Project grant (1994)

Toronto Arts Council

- \$5000 grant to visual artists (2004)
- \$4000 grant to visual artists (2000)

TEACHING

- 2005-2007 Lecturer, McMaster University, Hamilton
- 2003-2006 Lecturer, State University of New York, Buffalo

Artist's acknowledgments

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Carleton University Art Gallery Staff
Director: Diana Nemiroff
Curator: Sandra Dyck
Curatorial Assistant: Patrick Lacasse

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Carleton University Art Gallery
St. Patrick's Building, Carleton University
1125 Colonel By Drive
Ottawa, Ontario K1S 5B6
Telephone: 613.520.2120 Fax: 613.520.4409
www.carleton.ca/gallery

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