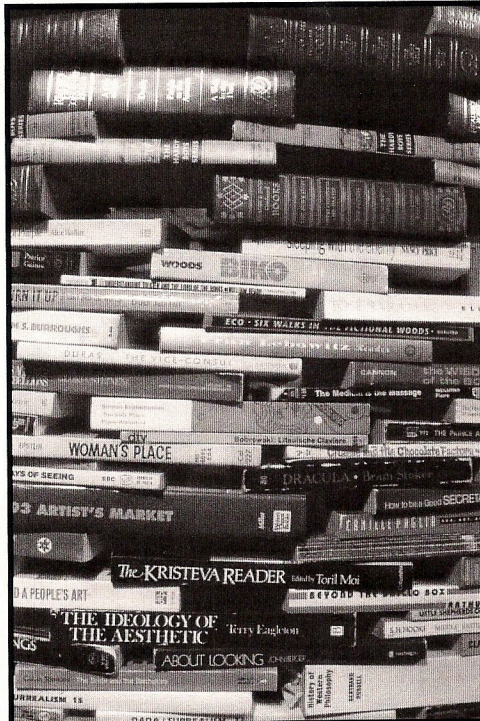


# ▶ ARGUMENT

#5



a site installation by  
**TOM BENDTSEN**

May 11 - June 16 2001  
opening Friday May 11 @ 8 pm

***Hamilton Artists Inc.***



## arguments the accumulative installation of Tom Bendtsen

*"...the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a similar existence and composes a similar order... No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is of his relation to the dead poets and artists."*

- T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent", 1919

*"In books lies the soul of the whole past time."*

- Thomas Carlyle

The essays of T.S. Eliot, particularly "Tradition and the Individual Talent" are cornerstones in the foundation of 20<sup>th</sup> century criticism. The very fact that this art exhibition requires a writer to establish its critical context owes much to Eliot's repeated insistence that artists be aware of the historical platform upon which they stand and work. Indeed, much of our anxiety as artists trying to make statements worthy of history and impervious to critical dissection can probably be sourced back to Eliot.

But what does it really mean to confront this edifice of history, to look tradition square in the face? Eliot might have had us believe that the history of ideas is a solid and pristine architectural monument which shifts and adjusts its perfection only slightly when a new work is added on top. Contemporary perspectives would probably imagine something else, recognizing that a wildly diverse, wildly globalizing culture can never have a single recognizable, quantifiable tradition of art and literature. It has been challenged, changed, refuted, and deconstructed one too many times.

Nevertheless, Tom Bendtsen's *Argument* series – which this gallery is now graced with *Argument #5* – gives us just such an opportunity to look at a manifestation of tradition. Using books from his own collection, along with borrowed books from libraries, churches, and other public institutions, Bendtsen constructs impressively large imitations of classic architectural forms – arches, towers, walls, columns. Textbooks, literary classics, and pocket novels are strategically arranged and juxtaposed to create 'dialogues' within this architecture. 'Series' books like F. W. Dixon's "Hardy Boys", or "Reader's Digest Condensed Classics" establish level lines which ultimately organize the otherwise chaotic barrage of titles, genres, binding methods and font styles. Thousands of books are meticulously stacked and ordered.

The subsequent response is, initially, a feeling of awe. So many books, each one of them open to such vast interpretation, rest against each other in ways that insinuate a myriad possibility of interpretations. The final structure therefore represents an amalgam of thinking so vast as to be impossible to comprehend. To imagine what this structure supports or leads to...to imagine standing on top of this tradition only to be judged by it is almost terrifying. To attempt to assume ownership of all of this information would be as foolish as building a tower to god – eventually it would escalate into a nightmare of meaningless language – a post-modern tower of Babel.

And then, the awe subsides and is replaced by the sobering reality of what a truly fragile construction Bendtsen has erected. The books stack tentatively one on top of the other with no mortar between them. Not only that, but the selection of books used is inevitably personal, a record not of humanity but of Bendtsen's life, upbringing, race and socio-economic situation. In many ways there is nothing universal about this creation at all. It might even be construed as a kind of self-portrait, a way of establishing his position upon the cultural terrain.

And even if these sculptures are suggestive of Eliot's 'tradition' of Western history, then we ultimately must recognize them as works of eroding architecture. Books are not the bricks we thought they might be, and they don't all hold up the way we assume they might. The literary cannon is arguably an archaic, almost quaint notion that needs replacing.

Finally, we have to admit that Bendtsen's *Arguments* mark the coming death of a very tangible historical legacy: the printing and collecting of books. Libraries are filling dumpsters with tomes that they have meticulously eviscerated and digitized. Lunatics are building obsessive tunnels inside their homes with cheap, easily accessible volumes. Books are rotting, left out in piles and falling out of order – note that the books Bendtsen has borrowed from libraries have intentionally been freed of their library registration codes. A glorious, magnificent tradition is coming to a close. The very history of books, like old roman pillars or the walls of Jerusalem is crumbling to an end. Bendtsen's *Argument #5* simply restores to the tradition of books a semblance of its former majesty.

Tor Lukasik-Foss  
April, 2001