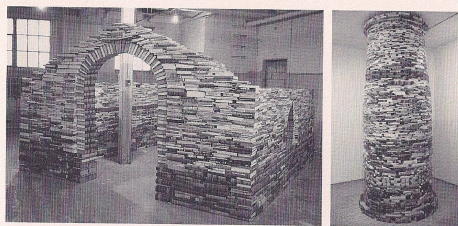


AR GU MENT

BY
CATH
ERINE
OS
BORNE

If you look at Tom Bendtsen's body of work from a sheet of slides held up to a window, you can see how dramatically materials have changed over the past decade—film, projectors, books, typography, leather straps, super-VHS, ice. You can also see why some think of him as the artist who makes installations out of old projectors and dusty reels of film; or the guy who makes bondage-type headgear sculptures with buckles and leather straps; and to others, the guy who builds towers out of books.



Argument #2

1997. 10,000 books stacked. Bindings face towards viewer. A historical grid from bottom to top. Base: 12'x14'. Peak: 9'

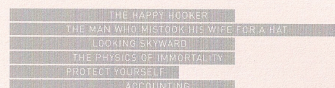
Argument #3

1997. 3,000 books stacked. Titles are placed in relation to create narratives or logics. Height: 12'. Center diameter: 4'

He does all that, and he makes other things as well. But while his various projects appear to have formed independently of one another, their conceptual underpinnings are very much in tandem. He's interested in how concepts and presentation equate—which one should be bigger: The seduction of how something looks or what it means? It's not so easy to spot at first that this is the kind of riddle going in all of his work because you can easily get caught up in the details of how they are built.

The number of volumes used to build one of the book towers is anywhere between 3,000 and 11,000. The books originally came from public libraries as donations.¹ He builds in little jokes by placing certain spines nearby (Priscilla Beaulieu Presley's *Elvis and Me* beside Patti Smith's *Babel*). The same books get used over and over. He hasn't read them all. One tower takes sixty hours to build, four hours to take down. When the books aren't being used as towers Bendtsen lives with them in his studio. The pulpy filler and how-tos take over as the first visual rush in his work, because the artist makes his process and presentation appear as if it is everything.

1. The following libraries were donors: the National Library, Ottawa; Roberts Library, University of Toronto; Scott Library, York University; Canadian Bible Society; Toronto Board of Education; Toronto Public School Board; Goodwill Enterprises.



In fact, his processes are just the hook, the thing that makes the content appear as if it is secondary. You can't read any of the books, for instance, they've been used as bricks, and stacked in circular towers that usually have no entrance. With the towers that include a set of stairs, the steps are too narrow to climb and they lead to nowhere but the ceiling. If the books are there to represent content, that content has been reduced to its most superficial elements – what can be gleaned from the titles on the spines, and what can be mentally catalogued by reading the names of authors.

And, as it turns out, the more academic the volume the more heavy the book tends to be, and the pulpier the title the lighter its weight. So, as if by natural order, when Tom Bendtsen builds his towers, the hierarchy of how they are laid is a reflection of intellectual and social ordering. Bibles, legal text, and leather-bound academic volumes are the foundations; literature and interpretative histories at the centre; *Reader's Digest* and *Hardy Boys* at a transitional band around eye level; and then upward, are the autobiographies of famous people, *99 Things To Make With Marshmallows* let's say, and other paperback and Scarsdale titles you can think of that are even shallower and airier than marshmallows. It's as if books were meant to be stacked like this, since the physical necessity of building a tower of books matches up with the historic geography of reading.

That's the superficial thrill of one of Bendtsen's towers, a series he has been working on since 1994, and that he has titled *Argument*. The towers have been serialized by numbers: *Argument #1*, *Argument #2*, and so on. To date he is at *Argument #6*². The book towers came out of an event that has become the backstory narration for them. There is an explosive beginning, an evolution, and one can assume eventually an ending.

2. *Argument #6* was installed at Koffler Gallery, Toronto, as part of a two-person exhibition, *Babel*, 2001.

Tom Bendtsen and I met to talk about his book towers and his other works while he was sitting a recent exhibition of his work at Toronto's BUSgallery³. We are seated on a bench that faces one of his newest pieces—a block of ice shaped into a portrait of his own head. It is being kept cool by an attached refrigeration unit. It's a faulty system. The head slowly expands into snowy ice crystals which blur any resemblance of a face, and then it melts back down to a shiny coating of water. There is a blue plastic pail underneath catching drips.

3. Exhibition at BUSgallery, Toronto, 2001.

I have that sheet of slides with me because there is one slide that doesn't seem to fit with the rest of his work. I can make connections between his earlier film sculptures that were, essentially, films unraveled from their reels and strung around a gallery space using an elaborate pulley system and strings. The sprawling lines of tape chugged their way around the room powered solely by the turning sprockets of an old projector. The film loops, just like his towers of books, I could see were about presentation verses content. The layout of all that film itself is so much larger than the resulting projected image—usually a small frame somewhere low on the wall and of such grainy quality its subject can barely be discerned.⁴ Bendtsen is pointing out, among other things, that film is near its technological end. Some might say the same is true for books, their physical bulk a contradiction to the microchip.

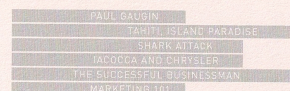
4. Tom Bendtsen did a number of film loop sculptures in the early 1990s. In the text, I'm referring to *Onward Number One* (1998). This sculpture included a single loop that ran through projectors to create two facing images—one of a torso and the other a mouth. The piece addressed Bendtsen's concerns of interior and exterior dualities. With *Onward Number One*, the body parts are stand-ins to reflect the conflict between the intellect (torso) and the soul (lips).



Red

1994. Leather harness with 24"x32" colour photograph.

The slide that didn't fit the pack, though, wasn't made from film reels or books. It is called *Red*, and looks like a fetishistic headpiece made of leather straps that wrap across the forehead, just above the upper lip, and underneath the chin. On either side of the wearer's face are small books positioned like blinders, the kind horses wear to keep them focused on what's ahead.



It turns out *Red* is significant in terms of Bendtsen moving away from making his film sculptures to building book towers. It's the linchpin between those two streams of work and what gives his decade-worth of art-making a conceptual wholeness.

D-DAY
 GREAT BEACHES OF EUROPE
 PINNOCHIO
 DEATH IN THE AFTERNOON
 SPAIN
 THE GEOLOGY OF EUROPE

Tom Bendtsen made *Red* in 1994, when he was participating in an artist group exchange between Montreal and Toronto. The show was called *Systems of Exchange* and it had aspirations of culturally uniting the two cities. "This quickly fell apart as mistrust ensued," Bendtsen writes in one of his artist statements. "Points of view diverged, and a censorship issue within the group became the true content of the exchange. What I was left with was a sense that all sides displayed incredible skill and tact in constructing their own dialogues. All articulate, logical, yet fundamentally in opposition."

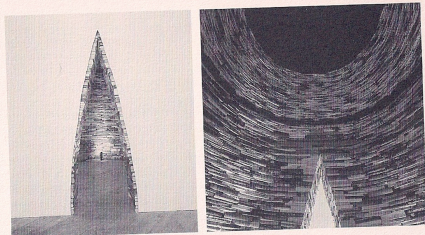
HOMO SAPIAN RISING
 BIG MAC
 THE WISDOM OF THE BODY
 MARY BEFORE MARK
 ANTHONY AND CLEOPATRA
 TECHNIQUES OF CIVILIZATION

But what struck Bendtsen most about the discussions and meetings and arguments and tantrums which the dilemma inspired was that here was a group of artists with all the same information made available to them, and yet no consensus of opinion could be reached. The outcome, he says, was a "free for all," a complete breakdown in communication.

Bendtsen elaborated that the exhibition was at its developing stages just as the Eli Langer censorship case was going to trial.⁵ It was a particularly volatile time within the Toronto art community, and the content members of the *Systems* group were arguing over was even more sexually suggestive than Langer's.

5. Artist Eli Langer was charged with obscenity in 1993 for displaying paintings in a Toronto gallery that depicted children in sexual acts. The police closed the show after complaints. Langer's court hearing became precedent-setting with many members of the arts community testifying on his behalf. Langer was found innocent but the incident has become an historical event surrounding censorship issues in the arts.

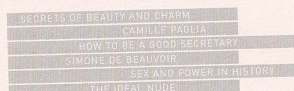
For the exhibition, which finally did open, Bendtsen made *Red*, a sculpture that can be strapped onto the head like a harness and that represents how personal obsessions and focus can be as restrictive as they are enlightening. They can be worn like blinders. The words inside each of the two small books were sensational ones, the kind that can hit a nerve just by being printed on a page—words like revolution, republic, love, and Hitler.



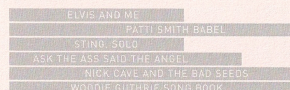
Argument #4 1998. 11,000 books stacked. Entrance. Height of opening: 6' (exterior view)

Argument #4 1998. Interior is round with a slight taper up. Height: 13' Diameter: 7' 4"

You could say that Tom Bendtsen also walked away from the *Systems* meltdown with thoughts of giving it dimension and form. What would a battle of words look like if it had a shape? Or at least that is how it appears he distilled the events, looking now at a slide sheet that includes six towers of books, all made since 1994.



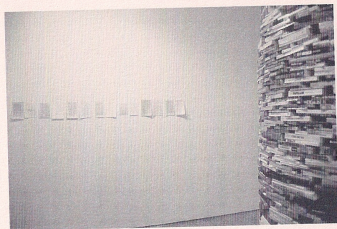
While living with the books, Bendtsen thought about their orchestration as being a shelter as well as a place for thought. He considered how books are connected to our vanities and self-doubts, and about how many of us use them to escape into the elite hide-aways of intellectualism. Books as security. Books as bricks which can build walls.



Shortly after the *Systems of Exchange* exhibition, Bendtsen collected about 9,000 volumes and stacked the donated books, books he'd gotten from public libraries, in his studio. They took up two-thirds of his working space. Bendtsen says he wanted to "use knowledge to limit [himself] physically." The stack of books became *Argument #1*, a project that wasn't exhibited but was significant enough in the development of the tower series that he gave it a leading title.

*Argument #2*⁶ was built from 10,000 books in the rectangular shape of a house, with a doorway and two arching windows. The structure had two walls, an interior one that was made up of pulp-fiction novels, how-to books, cookbooks, and pop psychology titles, the kind of books one thinks twice about before leaving around. The outer wall was classic literature, CanLit, academic titles, books on the history and the politics of Canada or someplace else; the kind of titles we keep out front.

⁶ *Argument #2* was created for an exhibition by the art collective Circa 1997, at 371 Wallace Ave, Toronto, 1997.



Rivers of white and
Argument #3

1997. Installation view.

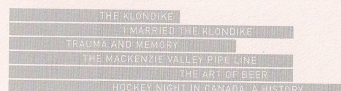
Tom Bendtsen has said that by using books as building blocks, their meaning is taken away. They are reduced to their most superficial information, and they can be sorted—as he did in *Argument #2*—either as titles that represent our personal desires (*Lose 50 Pounds In Two Hours!!*) or those that project how we'd like our desires or status to be seen by others (*War and Peace*). It comes round again to the riddle Bendtsen likes most: Which is bigger, presentation or content?

Bendtsen has started to find the invisible, or meanings in what exist around the words. He says he feels as though he's read the books, or at least more than he actually has, just by working with them, which is not unlike how I feel about my knowledge of Jimi Hendrix just because I happen to own one of his CDs. When *Argument #3* was shown at Mercer Union, Bendtsen also included a series of single pages torn from books that had traceable hidden faces in the spaces between the text; wobbly type portraits that appeared in what are technically known as "rivers of white," those white gaps that can meander vertically down a page and distract your eye.

The towers have continued to evolve over each construction, with a different emphasis worked into how they are stacked and what titles are selected for where. At a Mercer Union exhibition, *Argument #3*⁷ the tower, which had more of a Doric column shape, was made out of 3,000 culture and art history books, starting with Greek history at the base and continuing up to the present as the column reached the gallery's ceiling. *Argument #4* was built behind a wall. Shown as part of a group exhibition called *Canadian Shield*⁸, you walked into a catacomb and you were encircled. *Argument #5*, constructed for the Southern Alberta Art Gallery, included history books on the city of Lethbridge and on Mennonites. There was a "business section" (Lee Iaccoca's memoirs) and a "travel section" (with titles like *Natives of Tahiti*, and other white male fantasy books of the 1950s about exotic places, like Hawaii). Each tower has been built with a sense of purpose to it, "so you can start to see the invisible," says Bendtsen.

7. *Argument #3* was curated by Reid Diamond as Part 1 of an exhibition series titled *Spidersense*. Mercer Union, Toronto, 1997.

8. *Argument #4* was part of the group exhibition *Canadian Shield* held at 87 Wade Ave, Toronto, 1998.



He's played on that idea even more by creating text-based works on paper that have rivers of white, but which form slightly more defined shapes, like a fully outlined figure, a dagger, and a wine glass.

STUDIO 51
 MARGARET TRUDEAU ON MY OWN
 THERE IS SOMETHING I'VE BEEN MEANING TO TELL YOU
 FEDERALISM AND TRUDEAU
 PLAYBOY'S GUIDE TO WINE
 HOCKEY NIGHT IN CANADA, A HISTORY

The day we met at BUSgallery I asked Bendtsen about the block of ice shaped into the likeness of his own head, and his efforts in keeping the ice frozen in the middle of May. He said: "The head is a criticism of consumerism. ... It's also about the fear of not moving forward. About status, which we are all concerned with. ... Artists are obsessed with the next new idea in the same way consumers want the latest gadget or fashion." It is, to go on, a continual process of expansion and meltdown. Old is replaced with new, and the assumption is new is for the better. He also said this: "Through opposition we come up with ideas, and through playing around we come up with theories." He added that there are in-between times when there is a balance, a purity. Bendtsen's frozen head is called *Onward Number Two* and at some point there must be a moment like that, when the head is neither shrinking or expanding. Whenever that moment comes it is invisible.

Catherine Osborne is a founding co-editor of *Lola* art magazine

In *Rivers of White: Line*, the text Bendtsen has created tells a story that is divided down the middle of the page. On the left-hand side the story reads as brooding and dark, and then, when the words reach the centre, they flip, and carry on in descriptive terms that are positive and bright: "Fearing that evil would make its way back," we read to the middle point, and then "... now that the sun was out giving warmth to...." And on it goes, line after line, telling a story that has been physically divided into left and right, as though what is being shown simultaneously are two states of mind, or the conflict of inner thoughts and outward motives:

"... the damp dark laneway, Nixon grabbed his amo || and walked outside into the sunshine..."

coming down hard, with a determination unseen until hope and then luck spontaneously came. Fearing that evil would make its way back again now that the sun was out bringing warmth to the damp, dark laneway, Nixon grabbed his amo and walked out into the sunshine toward his nemesis. The rats gathered together eating from the abundance provided them by overflowing open sewers and garbage cans, gunfire exploded with the exuberance of a fireworks show. Sun was replaced by smoke as darkness crawled into the laneway, a kitten rolled out from behind a garbage dumpster, filthy and covered in lice this kitten played with a fuzzy little ball that looked like a half rotten fish eye, as darkness consumed what light was left. Marble skies turned to black, disease and despair loomed. Nixon came out into the plaza where young women danced for the glancing eyes. Lecherous abusers drooled, mothers with babies in arms picked as if nothing was wrong with this scene. Fears oozed from the childlike faces, moments of joy still came to these distorted young women, however, this expression of contentment only helped to make them more desirable to predators. Rain in city would help to cleanse the ancient square and drive out the parasitic element. Dirt was easy to forget about when presented with an alternative even if that alternative meant avoiding everyone and everything. Imagining beauty carried him through the darkest of times. The sky opened in a bang, then came clear, clean rain. Forward Nixon marched, what lay ahead scared him, to a farm boy raised in a small town on the prairies, violence was not sometime now, murders was a different story however. Memories flooded back to Nixon, the hard times that made him. A childhood of great joy, for the most part, unfortunately the dark times leave a larger mark on ones memory, the good can easily be overtaken by the despair of family skeletons. In some ways he drew strength for his childhood, even if that strength lend him to abusive ends, it could be said that he had no control of his violent temper because of his past. Coming to a turn in the road that was reminiscent of the road that ran past the old farm house. Nixon stopped, spun to his left in one graceful motion, and ran panicked past the old buildings, past the dump a lane way would lead him to the country. Very little of the pollution that crippled the filled city existed in the country, clean air and water could not keep the people from moving into the city, a way of life that at first brought plenty of success to Nixons people, but then led them to mistrust. Trust is the fundamental component in a good society, mistrust begets fear, begets violence. A long time ago, when all was plentiful, this society wanted more, their rural life couldn't fill the desire for growth and challenges. It made it impossible to stay. Nixon past the last ruin, in one of the old courtyards he heard a faint scream, a final reminder before leaving forever. In front of him was the unknown, dreams of wealth and greed would be hard to ignore, in his future temptation would not exist. But first, before that, he would do one last crime. A short day from now the small village he was looking for would bring his destiny, if he could just get a bit of luck, perhaps the task at hand could leave the blood letting for another time. This changed his spirits, the thought of not having to make war on the land owner hadn't occurred to Nixon. The county air was bringing out the best in Nixon, or so he believed, the revenge made him, his father and grandfather, what they where, a family of deceivers, thieves, abusers and misfits, now anger was replaced a feeling of great joy. Nixon became confused by this weakness. Then as if it was his calling, he smiled and turned his thoughts back to the scoundrel who disgraced all who came before him: the handsome, the noble and especially the weak and the grotesque. Who else was there to continue the family name and avenge the past? All the others were dead. Now was not the time for romantic daydreaming, he would have to act with aggression and intent, his positive hope for the future should only be thought of after the deadly deeds that awaited an unsuspecting, quaint hillside town. Dreaming

Artist Acknowledgements

Thank-yous
Joan Stebbins and the Southern Alberta Art Gallery, The National Library in Ottawa, Bora Laskins Law Library at University of Toronto, Scott Library at York University, Canadian Bible Society, Goodwill Enterprises, Toronto Board of Education, Toronto Public Libraries. Also Catherine Osborne, SMALL/Andrew Di Rosa and Marie de Sousa, as well as The Canada Council for the Arts, Ontario Arts Council and Toronto Arts Council.

Acknowledgements

We are privileged that Tom Bendtsen's first exhibition west of Toronto should be mounted at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery. Introduced to Bendtsen's work during his association with Toronto's Canadian Shield Collective, curator Joan Stebbins became intrigued with the idea of placing one of Bendtsen's large book structures in the former Carnegie library wing of this gallery. Subsequent discussion revealed that the artist too was interested in exploring this metaphorically rich conjunction. For the realization of this project the gallery owes a debt of gratitude to Joan Stebbins and Tom Bendtsen.

In an ironic touch, particularly in this age of instant electronic access to information, several thousand pounds of books were packed in boxes and shipped from Toronto to Lethbridge and carried up the stairs to the gallery where Bendtsen constructed his proverbial Tower of Babel, *Argument # 5*. Added to the mix was a selection of books on topics of local interest generously loaned by the Lethbridge Public Library. We thank George Hall, then Acting Chief Librarian, for allowing us to use the library's books in this unconventional manner.

Catherine Osborne's essay provides the reader with an interesting documentation of the artist's practice up to and through his *Argument* series, offering insights on pivotal junctures in the development of Bendtsen's work. Andrew Di Rosa has designed a handsome catalogue, while photographs by Don Gill and the artist reveal the diversity of Bendtsen's structures.

This project would not have been realised without the generous support of The Canada Council for the Arts and the Alberta Foundation for the Arts. We thank these funding bodies, the City of Lethbridge, our membership and many donors for their sustained patronage.

Marilyn Smith
Director

Works in the Exhibition

Argument # 5, 2000
7,000 remastered books
dimensions variable

Rivers of White, 2000
four works (figure, dagger, wine glass, line)
printed text on paper
24" x 18"