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Garden of Forking Paths: A Conversation with Derek Sullivan

by Saelan Twerdy

In the last decade, Toronto-based artist Derek Sullivan (b. 1976) has refined a playful, idiosyncratic practice that uses everyday forms (books, posters, furniture, and kiosks, to name a few) as arenas in which to stage language games and construct visual puzzles. Folding together the overlapping histories of modernist design, minimal and conceptual art, abstract painting, and concrete poetry, Sullivan's drawings, sculptures and books can be as light and elegant as origami—but also as susceptible to being unfolded, reconstructed or set adrift on the unpredictable currents or breezes of the wider cultural ecosystem.

Sullivan's additive and generative methods ensure that few of his pieces retain a fixed form or decisive reading. In fact, reading in his work stands in as both an embodied activity—involved in the acquisition and *flâneur*-ish exploration of books as objects and spaces—and as his principal metaphor for interpretation and meaning-making. At the same time, Sullivan's penchant for referentiality and recombination ensures that both authorship and ownership in his work remain constantly in motion. From early works like *Books Wanted* (2004) (which mimicked a hand-drawn sign with pull-tabs seeking copies of rare artists' publications) and *National Gallery Catalogue* (2003) (a hand-made decoy replica of the catalogue for Donald Judd's 1975 solo show at the National Gallery of Canada), Sullivan's covert appropriations and accessible formats have been a way to toy with the economies of art and inspect the knots that bind knowledge, experience and pleasure to objects and images.

In the Fall of 2011, Toronto's Power Plant gallery staged the largest solo exhibition of Sullivan's work to date: *Albatross Omnibus*, an ambitious project that included a commissioned series of 52 limited edition books produced through print-on-demand technology, which were hung from the gallery's ceiling, accessible only by ascending one of several sky-blue industrial stepladders. In another room, a zigzagging wall that mimicked an accordion-fold book (also the format of the exhibition's catalogue) acted as support for two of Sullivan's ongoing series: *Poster Drawings* and *Illustrations from The Albatross*. Simultaneously with *Albatross Omnibus*, Jessica Bradley Art + Projects staged another solo show of new sculptures by Sullivan. On the occasion of this welcome abundance of work, I conducted an e-mail exchange with Sullivan in which we discussed his methods, his interests and the many hats he wears: artist, collector, librarian, and gardener.

SAELAN TWERDY (ST): In his catalogue text for your show at The Power Plant, AA Bronson pointed out something that I hadn't noticed: your work never touches the gallery walls. Your *Poster Drawings* and *Illustrations from The Albatross* are supported by the custom-built accordion-fold structure in the first room, and the 52 books you produced are suspended from the ceiling in the second room. Is there a deliberate gesture of refusal here? It seems significant that, for your biggest institutional show to date, you've chosen an unconventional form of installation.

DEREK SULLIVAN (DS): It wasn't so much a gesture of refusal, but rather one that used both my additions and the native structure to carve a path (and at times a narrow one) in which the viewer needed to move. The Power Plant was the "book" that held my project and *Albatross Omnibus* was a project that considered

the architecture of the book in a number of forms. A book is a space from which we all can intuit a path through—we all know how to move through a book, either with the intention of the author/designer, or against it. My wall was an enlargement of an accordion-fold book, where the book's architecture was scaled up to that of an actual wall, making it as if the drawings placed on it were illustration plates on this text. The separation from the native architecture of The Power Plant was to force the viewers to be within the space carved by the building and the space carved by the work.

ST: Stéphane Mallarmé's remark that "everything in the world exists in order to end up as a book" has been brought up with regard to your work before, but it seems especially apt when talking about exhibition catalogues. The catalogue for your show at The Power Plant is like a model of the exhibition space in that it presents all of the posters, drawings and book covers on a big accordion fold-out. So as much as the exhibition was about reading as an embodied experience and books as architectural, spatial forms, the lasting artifact of the exhibit is naturally, inevitably, another book. Is it fair to say that your work is more at home on the page than in the gallery?

DS: An exhibition and a book have much in common. They both set out to structure and sequence works in relation to one another in a way that allows other connections/expressions/authorships to be revealed. The viewer of an exhibit or reader of a book moves through both over a period of time, adding their subject positions as a variable to whatever structures have been conceived by the author/artist/curator. I don't necessarily agree then that my work is more at home on the page than in the gallery, rather I would suggest that my work treats the gallery and the page similarly: as forums where new relationships and contexts are tested, but one that also collapses the book and exhibit into one another. The catalogue for *Albatross Omnibus* is an important component of the project as a whole and is not meant to be seen solely as a separate document. It is a cumbersome thing, one that could be opened up and expanded into a 26-foot-long sheet, but can also be flipped through as if a more conventional codex. Accompanying this book-wall-sculpture is a separate slim book that contains texts about the project. I'd asked the designer to create a catalogue that would puke its contents across the room, a book that could run through your fingers and physically get away from the reader. It isn't an easy book to handle. Rather than acting as an epitaph for the exhibition, it allows its structures to continue in an analogous form outside the duration of the show.

Derek Sullivan, *Albatross Omnibus*, installation detail, The Power Plant, Toronto, September 23 to November 20, 2011
PHOTO: TONI HAFKENSCHIED

The Booklover



ST: A great deal of your work is explicitly concerned with books and reading, and even those works that aren't share many book-like qualities. You tend to choose mediums (books, posters, kiosks, furniture) that are prosaic, accessible, interactive, and generally mass-produced or multiples. And, as with exhibitions, these forms often function as platforms or forums in which other things can be collected and put into dialogue. Hence, your work is often packed with references and citations. This can be inviting—it gives viewers an entry point—but it can also make the work more opaque and exclusive. So I'm curious about how you navigate this dynamic between the openness and contingency of popular forms and the hermetic, secret-code aspect of specific references and content.

DS: Many of my projects utilize a revolving or accumulating subject matter, where the literal, specific content changes over time. This can happen in many ways: in works like *Endless Kiosk* (2005), the sculpture accumulates printed materials applied by the public, creating a surface that literally changes all the time. This happens in my print-on-demand book works like *The Booklover* (2008), where each copy ordered and printed has the capacity to be a unique iteration, as I'm constantly adding to and refining the content, or with my *Poster Drawings* which, although fixed materially, accrue titles as they are exhibited in order to account for the trajectory of the works' exhibition histories and contexts. In any artwork, there are many, many things happening at once, and we only need utilize a different paradigm to decode any work in a myriad of ways. I use these cumulative strategies as a tactic to destabilize meaning and put the onus on the curiosity and knowledge of the viewer. Although at times references do sit obviously in my work, they often are present as a red herring, or perhaps as a dare. I more often plant nonsensical connections, other times I follow a fuzzy logic, and other times a poetic disregard for what has come before.

I have problems with a type of reading of artworks that draws too much on our hard-wired capacity to read significations, works that need to be understood as a tallying of external references, that rely on a kind of conceptual arithmetic. I think "albatross omnibus" in some way describes the weight one's knowledge brings to our experiences: as a viewer/reader, how do we reconcile what we have read when confronted with something new?

ST: When you put it that way, prior knowledge sounds a bit like a burden for the reader, much like how history and precedent might be a burden for the artist. But you're something of a collector yourself, and your works also function as little collectors on their own. Collecting in this sense would be almost like going looking for an albatross to hang around your neck! And, of course, there's all kinds of negative stereotypes associated with collectors—snobbish, obsessive, socially maladjusted—though in the art world the positive Walter Benjamin figure of the collector-as-artist might be more dominant. And you're actually part of a club of art-book enthusiasts and collectors, and a meeting of your book club at The Power Plant was part of the public programming for *Albatross Omnibus*. So, how does the notion of collecting fit into your work?

DS: The works do accumulate in different ways, but each project has its own behaviour for this, and even within a series, like the *Poster Drawings*, there isn't any consistency in how or when the titles are added. The type of titles varies greatly, too...with a lot of the works, the word "accumulation" that makes up the title isn't present so that all the elements should be decoded, but rather to

be present as an object, as an amount of text that is more or less opaque. And even the most opaque and contradictory titles speak to the fact that ideas can change over time. There is something about the sense that emerges from a group of objects, even the most heterogeneous group...the thrill of scanning someone's record shelf, digging through a box of junk left on the sidewalk. My works collect, but I wouldn't call myself a collector.

ST: Perhaps not, but you have made works, like *Books Wanted*, that convey a collector's fascination with rare and hard-to-find items. And I assume that you do actually want to own those books. But it seems to me that your interest lies more in sabotaging the collector's mentality or circumventing the way that scarcity adds value, like with your decoy books (*National Gallery Catalogue*) or something like *Burying Small Fires*. So if your practice involves collecting things, perhaps it's not with the aim of keeping them to yourself, but of putting them back into circulation. Which would make you a librarian rather than a collector.

DS: A librarian, or a gardener or a birdwatcher? I'm not sure. Those decoy works were addressed more to people who collected this material than myself. I'd been making handmade decoys of Lawrence Weiner's *Statements* since 2005 and, for the first while, I was setting aside all monies generated from sales to ultimately buy an original copy. In the meantime, I was able to access an original in a library special collection, and after that had no desire to actually own an original anymore. For me the desire is more about access: I simply want to be able to experience these books; I don't need to own them. This is the pleasure of Book Club, where you do get to handle materials that are difficult to find elsewhere, and they are presented by their owners, adding an idiosyncratic narrative to the experience.

ST: I wanted to ask you about gardening, since there are a number of references to garden design in *Albatross Omnibus*. What I like about this is how gardening is a kind of arranging and collecting, but the gardener is a much more attractive model for an artistic practice than the collector. There's a relationship to an ecosystem that's involved, and the gardener's materials have their own life and agency: they grow and change. The gardener doesn't just select and display, s/he actually has to care for their garden. And then the garden itself is a space that other people can be welcomed into, and they can wander around in it. Things come to fruition, they can be harvested, they die, and then they sprout and bloom again. I think all of this is wonderful. What motivated you to start working this theme into the exhibition, and how does it relate to the rest of the work for you?

DS: I started gardening about six years ago, but it was only in the past few years that I began to think of this as a parallel activity in relation to my art practice. For all the reasons you mentioned, it becomes an interesting analogue to being an artist. I've always been a huge admirer of the work of Kurt Schwitters, and gardening becomes an interesting way to think about the cumulative ebb-and-flow of his practice, the way the works drew elements from a variety of sources, from the banal, to the political, to the avant-garde practices he networked with. The work was the product of cultivation and indeed some works, like *The Merzbau*, grew over the years. It also places the author in the role of catalyst: someone who sets a process into motion that is open to input from the outside, that is subject to the elements, that inevitably grows, changes, is refined and grows again...it must be tended.

Derek Sullivan, *The Booklover*, 2008–ongoing, print-on-demand book, unlimited, variable edition, variable pagination, 23 cm × 15 cm
IMAGE COURTESY THE ARTIST



Derek Sullivan, illustration from *The Albatross*,
2010, gouache and EPSON print on paper,
61 cm x 46 cm
PHOTO: CHRIS THOMAIDIS; COURTESY
JESSICA BRADLEY ART + PROJECTS

Parrots,
Photo-
copiers
&

Examples
+
a Glass
House
+

Burying
Small
Fires

gar-
den
struc-
tur-
es

Incomplete
&
Open...

Snow's
Nose

A view of
the garden
from the
studio
window

"You were right. Any fact be-
comes important when it's con-
nected to another. The connec-
tion changes the perspective;
it leads you to think that every
detail of the world, every voice,
every word written or spoken
has more than its literal mean-
ing, that it tells us of a Secret.
The rule is simple: Suspect,
only suspect. You can read sub-
texts even in a traffic sign that
says 'No littering.'"

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Derek Sullivan, detail from *Albatross
Omnibus*, 2011, 52 artist's books, each 96
pages (17cm x 12 cm). Commissioned by
The Power Plant, Toronto.
PHOTOS: CHRIS THOMAS

Derek Sullivan, *Albatross Omnibus*,
installation view, The Power Plant, Toronto,
September 23 to November 20, 2011
PHOTO: TONI HAFKENSCHIED



For *Albatross Omnibus*, the design of the exhibition was of a circuit, or a path...in particular, I was thinking about the 52 books as if they were seeds, how each day one title would distribute out of the gallery, and how each stand-alone title would then exist as a stand-alone fragment outside of the landscape of the exhibit. Each copy would “plant” itself on a bookshelf and (given how discretely identified each one was) would hopefully develop and be interpreted based upon its new context.

ST: I also see the idea of gardening as something that’s related to your interest in the decorative arts, or to places where decoration, functionality and avant-gardism all come together. For example, your fascination with modernist book cover design or the way that, in *Poster Drawings* and *Illustrations from The Albatross*, you take Daniel Buren’s stripes or Bridget Riley’s patterns or Martin Kippenberger’s gingham and you render them in a handmade way that foregrounds their graphic-design elements. Your reproductions of modernist furniture, like the Gerrit Rietveld chair that was used as a book stand in The Power Plant’s gift shop, fit in with this too. How do you think of your work’s relationship to decoration?

DS: Of the painting references you mention, I do select these patterns, on the one hand from the artists you mention, but on the other, these are vernacular forms that have as interesting resonances outside of the art historical context as within it. With the poster drawings in particular I am selecting (or “clipping”) forms from a range of fine and decorative arts. The *Poster Drawing* project as a whole (and it is continually growing) collapses distinction by this diversity of source material: each then becomes a screen that can receive new information. Some of them do have more baggage than others. There are always more possible permutations, more possible signification, that can be piled onto forms that are essentially empty.

I’m drawn to the way designers deploy their forms into the world, how a typographer can refine a typeface (and have ideas of where it might be best utilized) but once it enters circulation they have little control of the type of messages the typeface expresses. The same for furniture designers, whose pieces (if widely manufactured) can end up in a wide range of contexts outside their control. To see a Judd sculpture sensitively installed is a breathtaking experience, but there is something compelling when you get to see a badly maintained one with greasy fingerprints marring the pristine surfaces.

ST: With regard to *Illustrations from The Albatross*, the text (*The Albatross*) is entirely fictional—as in, the images are presented as if they accompany a text that doesn’t actually exist, correct? Do you have any plans to realize that text, or to collect that project as a book?

DS: The text is not accessible, or rather, the text exists, but only in what might be imagined in the relationships between the illustrations. It is a contingent text (a poem? a fiction? a history?) based on how each viewer might interpret the images.

ST: On a similar note, you’ve produced quite a number of books at this point, but almost all of them contain either collections of images or some kind of word game (*Essay Piece*, *Nine New Titles*, *Incomplete and Open...*) that plays with or rearranges some existing text. Is there any extent to which you consider yourself a writer or poet?

DS: I’m very drawn to poetry, and in particular the forms and

strategies of the concrete poets, but I don’t fashion myself a writer. Text and books appear in my work as objects, and although there are often texts that can be read within (some are rearranged from another source and others are original) I do foreground what the book or text can communicate from the macro view. In laser-cut text fabrics where, once hung and draped, the textual information is lost, but as a viewer you can detect fragments of letterforms, in the collapse of readability, a new “text” emerges.

ST: So, given your interest in concrete poetry (and also in constraint-based and puzzle-like literature like Perec, Roussel and Borges) and your penchant for playing with language and book forms, what do you think of the “conceptual literature” that people like Kenneth Goldsmith and Vanessa Place have been promoting? Is there any relation between that kind of writing and your art? It seems to me that there’s a natural connection between their idea—that digitization has opened up such an excess of raw material that the writer’s primary task now is not to write new material but to act as a filter, selector and organizer of information—and the notion of the artist as collector or gardener or librarian that we’ve been discussing.

DS: I am sympathetic to their strategies. I’m particularly drawn to the breadth of Goldsmith’s project. On the one hand are his books, which are more about the fact that they exist than anyone ever reading them (like *Day*, his word-for-word re-typing of an entire issue of the *New York Times*). On the other hand is UbuWeb, which is about compiling a diverse array of difficult-to-access materials that can be negotiated and manoeuvred through. These projects put the onus on the curiosity of the person coming to the works/site. Although some trajectories are laid out, it is the knowledge of the reader/viewer that allows the work to be decoded...the act of moving through material is generative.

ST: Can you talk about any projects you have planned for the future?

DS: This winter I’m going to be completing the Visiting Artist residency at Open Studio in Toronto. I’m going to develop a group of relief prints, collected under the working title “The Surplus Mapped,” a sequence of illustration plates from an absent book...a book which might have been about my pursuit of a particular portfolio produced by Kurt Schwitters in the early 1920s, or perhaps is a reflection on the surplus/waste printed paper that is generated by all printing processes, or perhaps about the creation of a time capsule in 1912 for opening in 2012.

I’m also working towards an as-yet-untitled solo exhibition for Galerie Emmanuel Hervé in Paris, which will include new sculpture and drawing.

Saelan Twerdy is a freelance writer who lives and works in Toronto. He completed a Master’s Degree in Art History & Curatorial Studies at York University in Toronto in 2011, and his reviews, interviews and features have appeared in Border Crossings, Blackflash, Bad Day, and Color magazine.