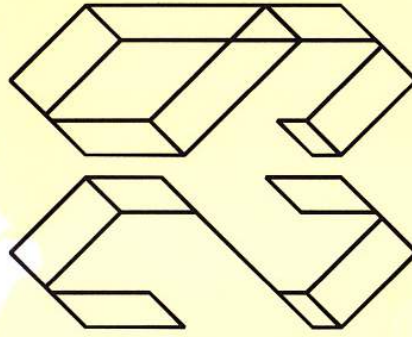




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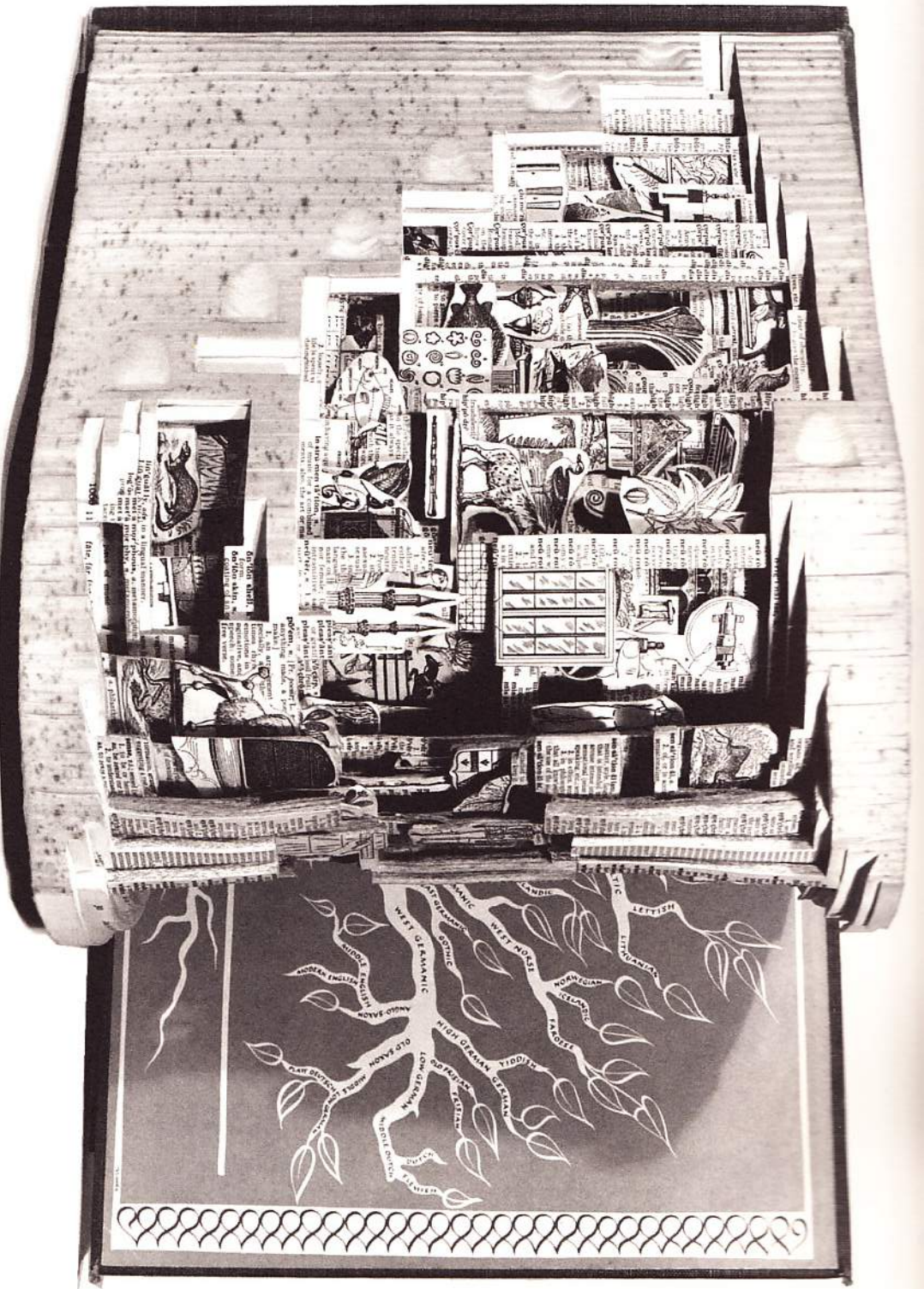
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LODOWN MAGAZINE

Charlie Kaufman, Brian Detmer, Scott Blake,
Working For A Nuclear Free City, Steve Olson,
Skatetrips, Minitogue, Crystal Anders and many
more topics off the main road ...
Resistance!





WEBSTER 2.0 VIEW

BRIAN DETTMER.

Counter Movement to the Intangible World

Even though stiff, bookish types are likely to suffer a mild seizure when they first get to see his work, Brian Dettmer's "Book Dissections" (or carved books) are, in fact, a way to present printed matter (and endangered media in general) in a new light — and to keep them alive. Mostly working with old tomes like encyclopaedias, textbooks and atlases, but also with VHS and cassette tapes, records, maps and other vanishing media, Dettmer dissects pre-existing material to create intricate, mind-blowing and exceptionally thought-provoking sculptures that function like a remix and a hyper-textual journey through the past. He literally cuts open and lays bare the communicative detritus of society to connect seemingly disparate elements and to quietly raise questions of fixed values, reliable notions in times of liquid hypermodernity, and to undermine our general understanding of "truth" and information. "Nothing inside the book is relocated or implanted, only removed. Images and ideas are revealed to expose a book's hidden, fragmented memory." We reached out to the 33-year-old Atlanta-based artist to dig a little deeper into his own hidden memory. And to produce a bunch of mind-melting pages you can stick your mental x-acto knives into.

Did archaeology or surgery fascinate you as a kid?

I'm not sure if archaeology or surgery fascinated me more than any other kid. Of course, I loved the idea of adventure, or discovering something no one else had discovered before, which is natural for most children and had been perpetuated or encouraged by movies like "Indiana Jones" and books like "Encyclopedia Brown".

I have always been making art, ever since I can remember. I have been constantly creating things, drawing, sculpting and painting. I was also into little spy things and fascinated by science and nature; pretending to solve problems, creating secret codes, making little devices and inventing ways of hiding things.

You moved to Atlanta not too long ago, why did you leave the Chicago area?

I was ready to quit my day job and work as an artist full time and my wife was offered a new job in Atlanta right around the same time. We had both always lived in Chicago and we were getting tired of the long winters. We had never been to Atlanta but after a series of visits we decided it would be a good change. It's a great balance between city and country, better weather, and a great place to focus on my work.

What can you tell me about earlier projects you did? What about your schooling?

I went to Columbia College in Chicago. I focused on painting in school but my paintings were always facile to a certain degree. I went through the steps of learning to paint realistically and honing my skills and then I began to create some surreal figurative work that I would paint on wood and cut into shapes that would fit together like puzzle pieces. I dropped figurative completely towards my last year or so and began investigating codes and other language systems in my work. I explored the gaps between communication's forms and its meaning through text and other systems.

Is it true you made paintings and drawings influenced by German expressionism in high school?

Well, yes. I experimented a lot in high school. I loved artists like Max Beckmann, Otto Dix, George Grosz, etc. It was partially an adolescent interest in all things gruesome and rebellious but I also felt that surreal sense of alienation and confusion that these artists were coming from. Of course, as a teenager growing up in suburban America, that should probably be a given.

Who are the artists that influenced you the most?

I think that Duchamp and Rauschenberg have probably had the most influence. They realized the importance of meanings and powers ingrained in the found materials and images they used.

You used to concentrate on various kinds of languages and codes in your early works; what can you tell me about those early artworks?

That is it that fascinates you about code/language systems?

I was playing with the idea of art as a "universal language" and the fact that any communication system had its limits and that nothing was really universal. There were all these interesting gaps between different systems and interesting things that happen when you take one system and apply it to a different material or meaning. I would create large abstract paintings that contained codes. It was sort of a joke, or a metaphor for art itself, but there was very interesting territory to explore.

As the fact that you're a Catholic an influence on your work?

Well, that is a sticky issue. I was raised Catholic but wouldn't really consider myself a practicing Catholic. I'm sure it has influenced the way I see things but that has never been intentional and it's hard to unwrap because I don't have an alternate "non-Catholic" history to compare to. There are certainly themes that have been ingrained into the way I see the world from an early age. I am fascinated with the body (in physical material and life/nature) and the way that a physical form or material can have meanings or connections to something else. Catholics go beyond your standard representation and into more slippery territory where something doesn't just represent something else, it is something else. This is very fascinating to me and recent sciences and theory have supported this slippage to be truer than most people acknowledge. The idea of transubstantiation or shape-shifting is an important interest to me. Of course this isn't specifically a Catholic thing.

It's a common theme in many non-western traditions and is an ongoing trend in biology and in technology. It's evolution in real time; we can't see it as it happens in nature but we witness it every day in technology.

When and how did the idea of creating "carved books" first hit you?

After I finished school my work became more tactile and I began ripping up book pages to exploit the texture (and camouflaged content) of the pages on the surfaces of my paintings. I was ripping up books and feeling guilty about it. When a painting was done, crusts from old books would lie on the floor and I began to think of the book itself as a lift-off point.

In my first book pieces I began stacking books and carving large holes into them. I was thinking about the value of physical labour and the rewards of a sensual, tactile experience vs. the traditional method of reading a book's text to gain knowledge. These ideas lead to working on individual books. Without a solid plan, I sealed some books up like bricks and began to carve into the front of one. They were all discarded, individual encyclopedias so their function is almost diminished as an individual without the set. I carved into the top of a book and came across a landscape on a page and then began to carve around it. A figure emerged below and I carved around it and continued. At the time my work had no referential imagery so I wasn't sure about what I was doing, but it was exciting.

Do you already know where the journey's going when you start the "excavation process"? How important is chance?

I always browse through a book to make sure the design, content and details will work for my idea but after I seal the book I have no idea what I will come across. It is like reading; I begin at the front and I go one page at a time and I have no idea what will be on the next page as I work. So there is a large level of chance or randomness that is in play. There is a certain push/pull between control and chance. It becomes a dialogue between what happens and how I respond. Sometimes this locks into intertwined themes or meanings and sometimes it becomes complete Dada.

So you DO browse through the books before you get started...

I always browse through but I never plan anything. I set up rules for myself and follow them. If I were to plan things it wouldn't be as interesting to me and the process or my philosophy behind its development would weaken. I go one page, or layer, at a time to make sure I use the most interesting or most appropriate image or text as I work in each area, but I never plan specific images. The discovery and level of chance is very important to me.

Besides scalpels, what tools do you use?

I use x-acto's (craft knives), several different types of tweezers, needle nose pliers and a handful of surgical tools that are use to hold things in place while you cut.

You say that "images and ideas are revealed to expose a book's hidden, fragmented memory" — that implies that there is "one memory", one "version" already there — but don't you think that you're the one CREATING that "memory" out of fragments? Just like a reader "creates" the text he or she reads...

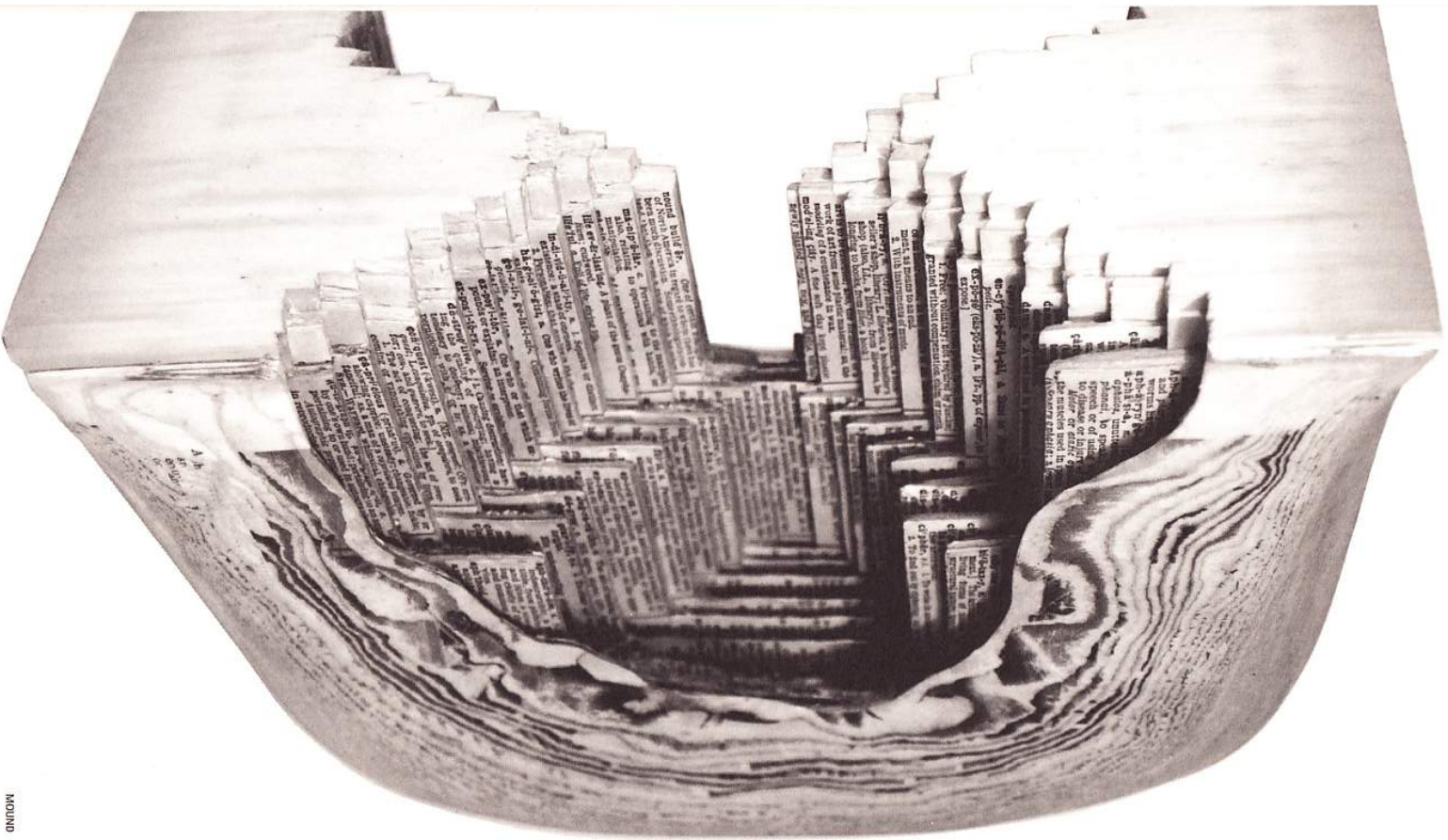
Well, I'm speaking in metaphors and philosophical concepts. When I use the word memory, I am trying not to imply that there is only one memory. Memory never exists as a single route or channel. It runs like a river, constantly changing and never the exact same route. There are limitless versions and of course one piece of mine can only expose one solid path with hints to an infinite number of variations. I don't think I'm creating the memory. I'm exposing a possibility, and just as a reader "creates" the text he or she reads, someone exposed to my work will create their own reading.

What's an ideal book to dissect? What is it that makes these books dealing with "facts" ideal objects for your work?

Most of the books I use are non-fiction. There are several reasons. I am interested in exploring history, science, and our concepts of what is true, not necessarily the fictional work of others. Encyclopedias, dictionaries, atlases and other reference books work in segments, in short blasts and patches disconnected in space or time. The content and relevance of factual information is constantly evolving and the form of these books is also becoming endangered as the book loses its monopoly to the internet and other forms of communication. A book has to fall into a linear frame of time, because of the form and space it dictates. Fiction is usually constructed to follow that form but non-fiction, or information, doesn't fall cleanly into a linear format. We experience things in patches and remember things through association. Our brains are structured this way and new technology encourages this non-linear way of absorbing new information. This is sort of frightening, not only is the object of information dissolving, but the historically linear structure of learning is also falling apart. There is no point in making a judgement call because I have no control over this evolution but it does open interesting questions about the role of the book and the assumed plasticity of analog information.



KINGDOM DETAIL



Is it important for you that there's no way back (both in the sense that you don't add anything to the books + you can't ever read the book again)?

There are several things at work here. One thing is that books are mass-produced so there is always a "way back" with another copy of the same book. The copy I use is sealed, its completed, resolved, and the uncomfortable tension of its limitlessness or unanswered ideas has been relieved. There is also a sort of control or restriction I set up for myself which results in a lack of control to what will present itself to me but at the same time my interaction is all about control. This is a bit cliché but after I establish my method I can't control what happens. I can only control the way I respond. The restrictions I set up allow for the initial material or book to be an important voice but it also forces more creative ways to accomplish a piece.

Did it ever feel like you were killing the tomes? Or does it rather feel like you're revitalising what's to be found between the covers?

It's a little of both. I would never use a book that doesn't have another copy out there. I also feel a sense of loss for the book before I begin to work on it. It is like a Christmas tree after it has been cut. It is beautiful, but it's no longer a part of a vital system. The books original function has already passed. You can't reverse time but you can freeze it. I'm re-defining the function; killing it to expose it. So in a way I guess I am revitalizing it by freezing and displaying its current state of death, like a stuffed animal in a museum.

Have you ever hidden anything inside a book?

Not for my artwork. When I was a kid I saw cartoons where they would have a book cut open with things hiding inside. I actually made one of these when I was about 10 or so. I had nothing to hide except some little notes and a wallet with a few dollars but the idea of cutting a hole in a dictionary and having a secret place to put things was very exciting to me.

I remember the idea of transforming something into something it shouldn't be was fascinating to me even when I was a child.

Your work has been called a "mash up". Don't you think it functions more like a remix? Do you like the idea of reminding when it comes to music? And: Would you agree if I were to call you the art world's counterpart to a "crate digger"?

Yes, I often think of the parallels between music and my own work. I titled my show in San Francisco last year "Remixed Media" with this in mind. The idea of a mash up would be to combine duelling sources of found material into

one new piece to create something new and I have done this with some recent pieces that have multiple books intertwined. I try to not work in a sort of direct translation from one media to another but those pieces are mash ups in a way. I go to a book store in the same way that a DJ might go to a record store. I'm not shopping as the average consumer. I'm looking at the books for their original content, texture and material, and thinking how it would work for my own work.

I read that you listen to a lot of music while at work: in which way does your choice of music influence the outcome?

That's hard to tell. I have always thought artists have much more time to listen to music than musicians do. I almost always listen to instrumental music and the songs are generally longer with slower transitions. A five minute pop song will pull my focus away or fly by like a second while I work. The music's pace may influence my pace and the mood may have an influence but it never melts over into content.

Do you believe that the CD is going to be among the discarded media soon?

I've thought about that and I think eventually it will. It may hold on a little longer than the cassette tape and I don't think it will be replaced by another object. It's already becoming less relevant with the convenience of digital audio files. They take up no space and cost less so most people won't look back. Call me nostalgic but I like having the material in my hand, the artwork on the cover and the sensation of pushing a button my finger can fit comfortably on to press play. If all media loses its material and becomes digital we will really be losing something.

Do you also store records and books like trophies of nostalgia, or do you try to fight this urge whenever you realize you've started "the hoarding process"?

I am a collector. I try not to hoard but if I have read a great book or heard great music I like to have it to go back to or share. If the content meant something to me then the object means something to me. It's part of saving our history and if it all slips out of the physical world and becomes digital we are more vulnerable, less tangible and it feels unstable. Nostalgia is part of it and nostalgia has some bad connotations but it is comfortable and it's consistent. As long as it isn't the ends to the means or a crutch it's pretty harmless.

Have you ever been into hyperfiction?

There are so many interesting things that are happening now that everything is digital that really couldn't have been envisioned before.



RAFAEL DETAIL

There are so many new routes exploding everywhere and it's really exciting. Digital media just lends itself to a DIY attitude and anyone out there with a computer can just lift anything and call it his own. Combine that with the fact that most kids play video games as often as they watch TV and no wonder they have trouble focusing on something that doesn't ask for their own input or interaction. The linear narrative is breaking up and feeling less appropriate to today's structures and schedules. The idea of the individual author is loosening, sometimes voluntarily and sometimes not. This is often unsettling but exciting at the same time. It will be interesting to see what survives after the ashes settle.

As a matter of fact, Donald Barthelme also comes to mind because he celebrated cultural detritus or "dreck" in his "prose poems" ... do you think there's a parallel between what you do and what the authors of first wave literary postmodernism did? Or would you consider your approach modernist in the sense that you're trying to "make it new"?

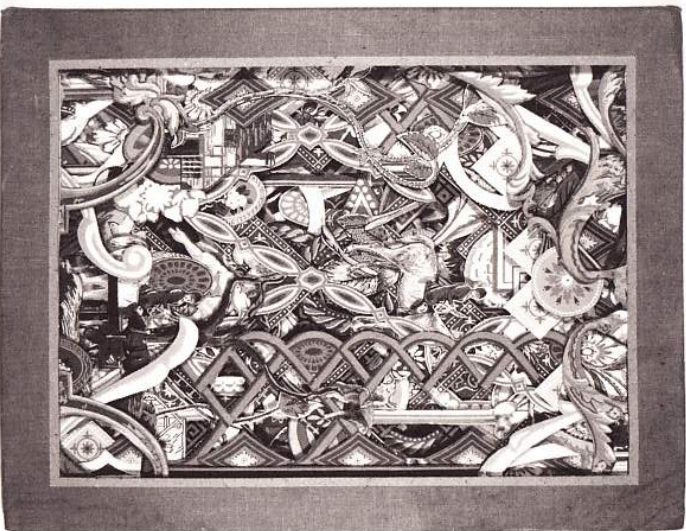
I think that the idea of making something from something else in our culture is very important to me but I don't believe that this means nothing new can be made. I'm not so cynical or ironic about my view. I'd rather make connections between different things and explore the limitless possibilities. We are all recovering from the cynical postmodernism and now we are left with the detritus of that position (detritus of the detritus). I think we can pick that up and make something new out of it. I don't know how to label myself. I don't think of myself as a modernist or a post-modernist. I think there is a lot that can be done that has never been done before, of course we're all pulling from the materials previous art and literature have left us with.



KINGSBOM



HARMONY HOUSE



THE BIGGER COLONIAL



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Recently you have started to alter the books to such a degree that they almost look like natural elements (stones? wood?); what's your intention with these works?

There are several parallels between the way technology and nature evolve and of course any material, natural or synthetic, originally derives from the natural world. It is only when things become digital or immaterial that the connection to the natural is broken. Books are history. They contain it and they are it. The materials are explored and carved much like natural ones because we are more saturated with information than we are with natural resources. Information is the natural material of our time and the analog shells can be explored like stone, or approached like their original wooden origin. There is a sensual, physical, tactile quality in old books that is becoming lost. When I approach the book as a raw material I am trying to rediscover and re-expose these qualities, highlight the natural qualities of the material.

You also did a piece with George W. Bush's State of the Union Address (2002); how did people react to that one? Was it the only political piece you ever did? (But then again, you also did the MIA map...)

Those are probably the only overtly political pieces I have done (both 2002) and with both pieces I tried to dissect or investigate things in a sort

of scientific, unbiased way. I cut every word of Bush's speech into its own audio file and then played it on random. His slow method of speaking lent itself well to the approach and the randomness of his words lent themselves to being mistranslated and misunderstood without a determined intention. It played in a public space downtown Chicago and several people reacted strongly against it because they didn't understand what the intention was. People who support Bush didn't like to hear his speech messed up and people who didn't support Bush didn't like to hear him speak and both sides thought it had some sort of subliminal meaning.

Please tell me something about the sculptures you did with VHS tapes; was it a different experience to work on those pieces?

I have been working with cassette tapes and VHS tapes, thinking about all these recently outdated modes of communication and the material we are left with. I like the idea that the black material contains information that is invisible to the naked eye, much like nature itself. The plastic shells become the branches and the tape become flowers and leaves. Each video has a pre-determined set of connotations or meanings that can be moulded into different ideas pretty easily. I'll go back and forth between different materials and they all have qualities and functions that hint at new ways they can be manipulated.

Since you deal with the physical presence of mediums as "carriers of data", how are your feelings about new media that seem so much more ephemeral?

I touched on this earlier, but that it much of what my work is about. The physical world is slipping, the tangibility and variety of older forms of media is all falling into one new material that we can't hold in our hand. It is both frightening and exciting at the same time. There is no point in making a judgment call since it is something I have no control over but personally I think we lose something when we lose the object. We gain space, use less natural materials and it becomes more accessible but as that happens it becomes less stable, less valuable and less important.

You mention "mediums that communicate faster and louder"; would you call your approach a kind of counter movement to these developments?

In a way it's a counter movement but in a way I'm taking approaches and processes that happen digitally and going to older materials and applying new methods to them. So in that way it is counter to the original mediums. I would say my work is a counter movement to the intangible world. I like to work with real material, and with ideas that take time to develop and take time to unwrap. Anything that speaks too fast and too loud will be digested and discarded at the same rate. I'm not interested in that. I'm interested in making something that will last longer.

What's planned for the future?

I think the possibilities of working with books, maps, tapes and other physical forms of media are endless. I will continue to push ways of approaching these materials but at the same time new things will present themselves to me as information continues to evolve.

And finally: Is bolognese your favourite food?

I make a great turkey bolognese that came from my Mom's recipe. There is something exciting about cutting into and consuming all those delicious layers.

WORDS: RINKIRRECA.ORG

BRIAN DETTMER IS CURRENTLY REPRESENTED BY KINZ, TILLOT & FERGUSON IN NEW YORK, PACE/SCHOFF IN CHICAGO, AND MADSEN, CUNNINGHAM & WATZ, TILLOT & FERGUSON IN SAN FRANCISCO.