

# Hors Livre







We invited Atlanta-based artist **Brian Dettmer**, who has made a name for himself by carving up books, to attack a volume of John Ruskin's *Modern Painters*. Ruskin expert **George Landow** deconstructs his handiwork.

The first two people to whom I showed Brian Dettmer's *Modern Painters*—one woman in her thirties, the other in her late sixties—reacted with the identical cry: “How could he do *that* to a book?!” Dettmer's *Modern Painters* appropriated the title and actual volumes of 19th-century Britain's single most brilliant and influential work of practical criticism, polemic, and art theory. But that is where the similarities end, because to make his sculpture, Dettmer destroyed Ruskin's opus, digging into and tearing apart an 1873 edition in order to make a three-dimensional form that, like all successful sculpture, presents us with something new as we circle it. From one angle, we find a face composed of lines of text partially covered by curvilinear cutouts taken from Ruskin's drawings of vegetation. In contrast, the opposite side highlights linearity, with a three-dimensional collage of Ruskinian pronouncements. Dettmer also tackled a 1987 condensed version, creating a shadow box of images including Gothic windows, cathedrals, and various saints all set off by phrases such as “external nature is,” “speaking of the sublime,” “seeking,” and so on.

Above all else, Dettmer's sculptures deconstruct the book—not only the volumes of Ruskin's *Modern Painters* that provide the sculptor's medium but also our very idea and experience of the book. I do not use *deconstruct* in its now-common meaning as little more than “destroy” or “analyze,” though, to be sure, Dettmer's *Modern Painters* certainly does that. Jacques Derrida, who is best understood less as a philosopher than as a Zen master doing away with impediments to clear thinking and feeling, made an important point when he coined his trendy term. For Derrida, an act of deconstruction reveals the illusory nature of the binary oppositions that clutter our minds, such as male-female, red-green, Caucasian-black, and, of course, the book-as-object and the book-as-text, the latter existing separately from its physical instantiation.

Derrida attacked common binaries, such as *presence and absence* and *inside and outside*, particularly as we use them in reference to books. In *Dissemination* (1972; English translation 1981), he uses his characteristically teasing, in-your-face method to pick apart our foggy ideas about such terms. Everyone knows books often have forewords and prefaces, sometimes afterwords, too, but we all also know that such things are not *really* part of the book. “Really?” asks Derrida, who gives his preface multiple titles: “Hors Livre” (outside the book), “Outwork” (as in a fortification), “Facing” (facade, something, one might add, Ruskin thought might lead architects into fakery), and finally the familiar “Prefacing” (note: an action, not a textual category).

Derrida playfully reminds us of something we all too often forget or ignore: we don't have very good words to explain how visual and verbal texts work. For instance, when Virgil, Dante, and Milton allude to the *Iliad*, we can't explain in what sense Homer's text is in or *inside* these works, nor can we explain in what sense Greek and Roman statues are in (or not in) Renaissance sculpture. As recent



OPPOSITE PAGE: Brian Dettmer in his studio, Atlanta, 2008. Photo: Andrew Kornylak. ABOVE: Views of Dettmer's *Modern Painters* (from 1873), 2008, in progress.





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COURTESY THE ARTIST AND KINZ, TILLOU + FEIGEN, NEW YORK.

OPPOSITE PAGE AND THIS PAGE:  
*Modern Painters* (from  
1873), 2008. Altered book,  
9½ x 7 x 6¾ in.





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:  
**Brig Laugier**, *Nouveau Larousse illustré, tome 2*, 1999. Altered book, dimensions variable.

**Tom Phillips**, *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel*, fourth edition, Thames and Hudson, 2004.

**Brian Dettmer**, *Amerigo*, 2007. Altered book, 11 x 3 x 7 in.

LAUGIER: COURTESY THE ARTIST. PHILLIPS: COURTESY THE ARTIST. DETTMER: COURTESY THE ARTIST. TOOMEY TOURELL.



copyright lawsuits have shown, we have trouble explaining the relationship of postcards and other mass-culture images to the images that reappear in artworks, such as those by Jeff Koons.

Our reception of Dettmer's work depends on our ability to see books the way Dettmer does: as material objects that promote specific cultural, economic, political, and philosophical agendas. Book lovers have long cherished their volumes as material objects, but it's only since the rise of new, nonprint media—television and computers having the most powerful effect—that we have begun to see the book without the assumptions of a long-dominant print culture. In concert with our experience of other information technologies, we have denaturalized the book: we no longer misconceive spoken language, writing, and books as natural objects. Indeed, some decades ago Marshall McLuhan's *Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) and Elizabeth Eisenstein's *Printing Press as an Agent of Social Change* (1979) revealed that the book was a *machine*, a technology for preserving, disseminating, and accessing text and images—a machine, moreover, that changed the way we think. In other words, these authors *decentered* the book (Derrida again), explaining that the transformative power of the printed book derives from its combined qualities of fixity and multiplicity. That is, having many copies of the same book permits readers widely separated in time and space to read the same text and thereby become members of a virtual community.

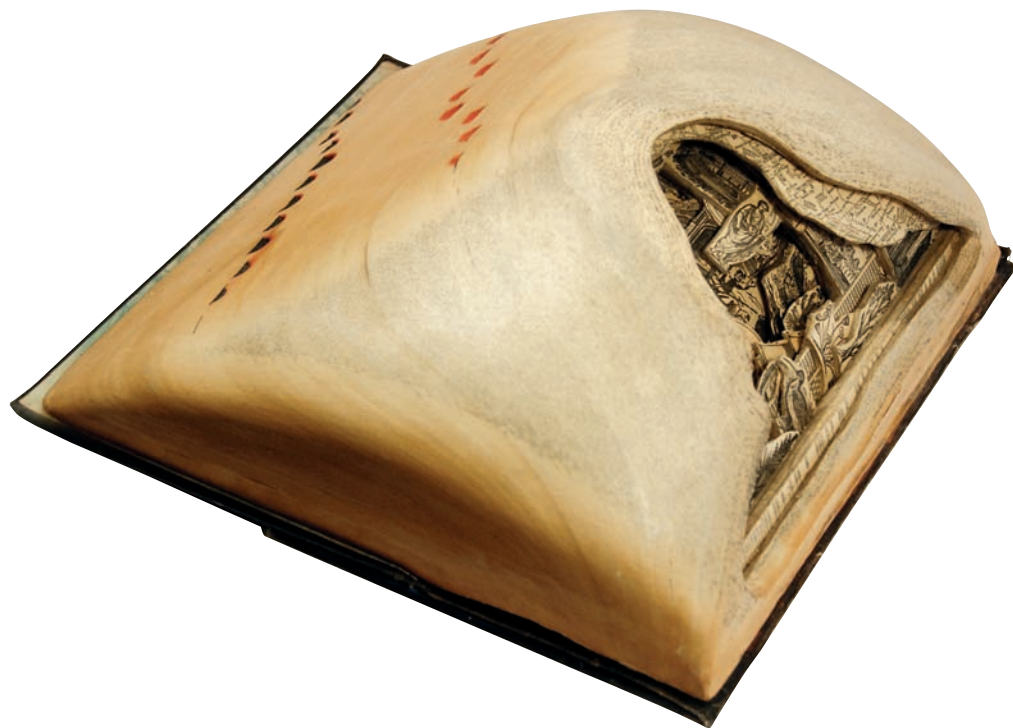
Brian Dettmer's *Modern Painters* appears to be at the intersection of sculpture, information technology, the artist book, and art history. This work shares some qualities with Brig Laugier's dramatic destruction and reconstruction of the book as object, for like the French artist's *Dictionnaire grec* (1997) and *Nouveau Larousse illustré, tome 2* (1999), Dettmer's work creates a sculpture from reconfigured printed books. Nonetheless, we immediately perceive obvious differences: whereas Laugier creates large simplifying forms by gathering large numbers of pages into massive shapes, like the quite beautiful waves crafted from a Greek dictionary, Dettmer emphasizes the minute, nervous detail rather than the effect of large masses. Think of the Pre-Raphaelites or Hogarth rather than the classical Poussin or Canova.

Moreover, Dettmer, unlike Laugier, respects and preserves the book as a means of communicating words and phrases. In this, his work resembles Tom Phillips's *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel* (1970), for like Phillips he also preserves parts of texts, working by subtraction as he cuts away rather than paints over the words he does not need. But unlike *Modern Painters*, a sculpture emphasizing its presence in space, *A Humument* essentially works only in two dimensions.

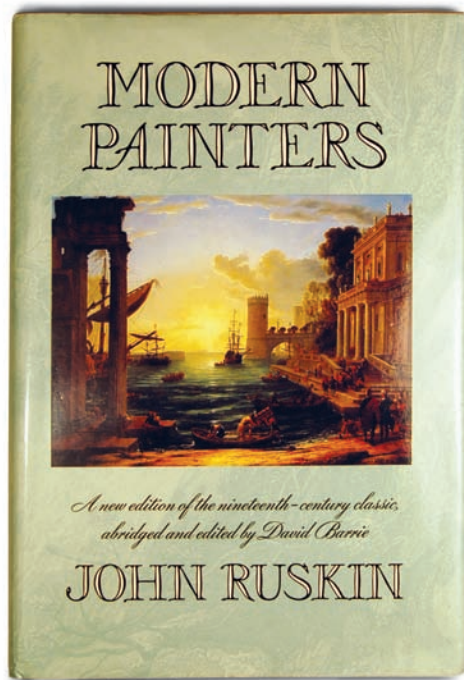


FROM TOP: Brian Dettmer, *New Universal*, 2007. Altered book, 12 x 7 x 5½ in.

Brian Dettmer, *Mound 1*, 2008. Altered book, 5½ x 13½ x 11¼ in.







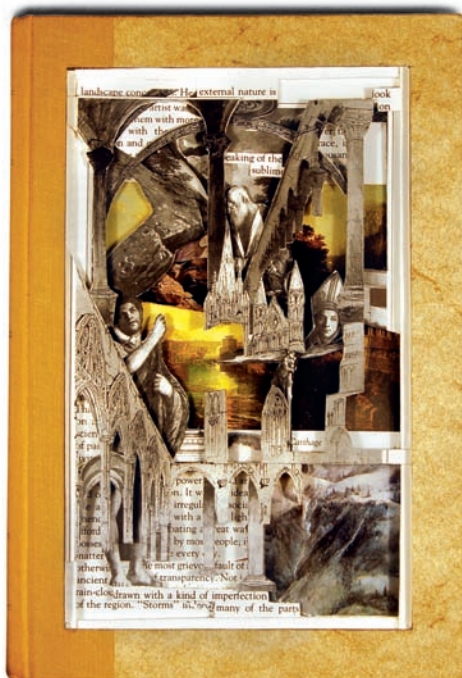
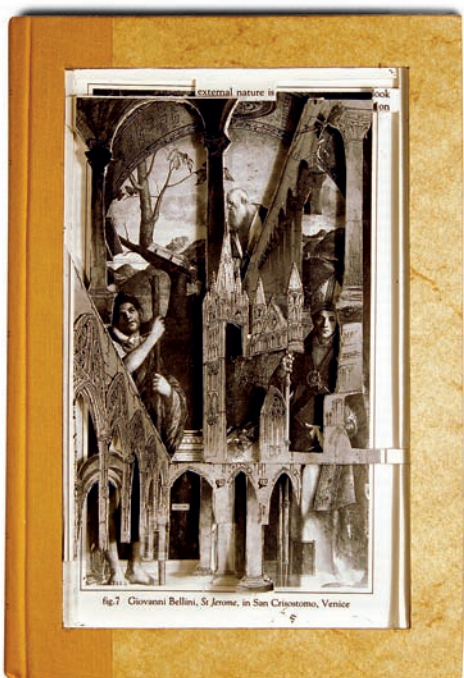
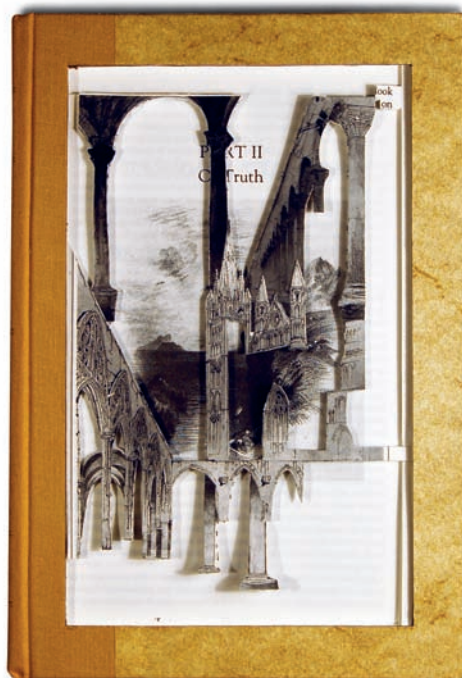
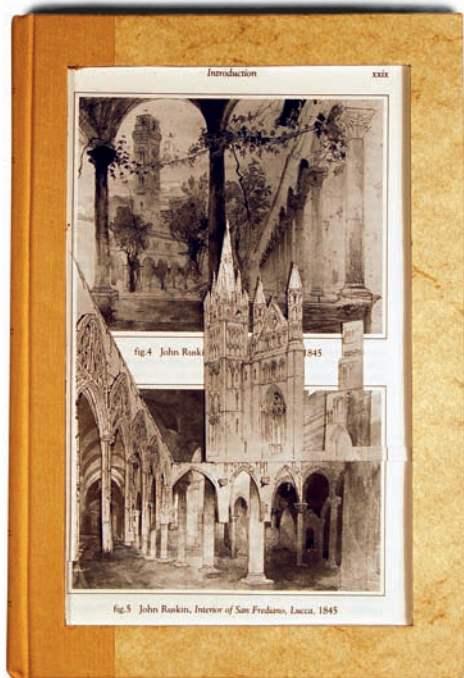
## Like Ruskin, Dettmer masterfully picks out detail in other people's work. But to produce this sculptural reconfiguration, Dettmer destroyed Ruskin's books.

Dettmer has carved through atlases and encyclopedias, but Ruskin's five volumes, which popularized such radically different artists as Giotto, Tintoretto, Turner, and the Pre-Raphaelites, provides fertile material for Dettmer—and a lens through which to consider Dettmer's work anew. Ruskin taught readers how to see, with fluid, often proto-cinematic prose. He began by arguing that Turner's visions of mist and fire derived from close study of nature's facts and ended with superb compositional and iconological analyses—very rare, almost nonexistent, throughout 19th-century art criticism. Between his first and fifth volume, Ruskin, an artist and critic frequently miscast as an advocate of moral art, proposed that simply experiencing the beauties of nature and art was itself an elevating spiritual act (elsewhere writing about fairy tales and fantasy, he emphasized that stimulating a child's imagination had far more importance than tacked-on moral statements, which he despised).

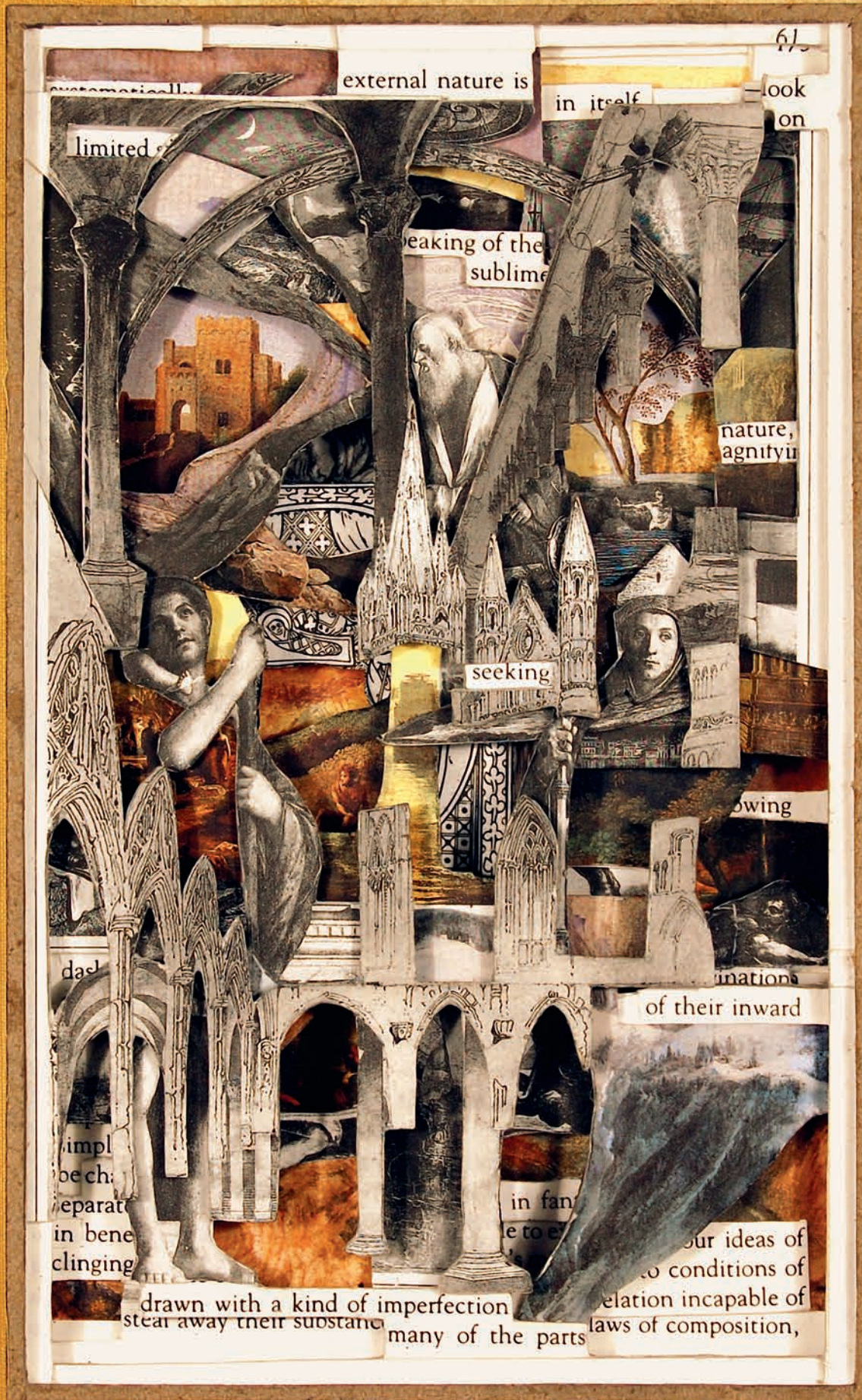
Like Ruskin, Dettmer masterfully picks out detail in other people's work, and like the author of *Modern Painters*, he has several modes, each of which creates a kind of spatial hypertext—hypertext that indicates connections by contiguity rather than by links. Of course, to produce this sculptural reconfiguration of Ruskin, Dettmer destroyed books (to the dismay of the two women mentioned at the beginning of this essay). In his gallery profile, the artist's response to such reactions shows a rare awareness of the way we sentimentalize books even as we ravage them: "There is this idea that, if you are altering a book, you are destroying something someone else made and something that could still be read. . . . The flip side is that most books are mass-produced objects and are often discarded."

The truth is that many people no longer experience the book as a particularly permanent or even aesthetically pleasing means of presenting text. College students more often than not read assigned course packets containing sloppy photocopies differing from the originals in size and page configuration. They also encounter massive novels like *Great Expectations* or *War and Peace* in paperbound editions that fall apart long before they finish reading them. These experiences destroy the book-as-object far more drastically than Dettmer, Phillips, or Laugier ever have. These artists' cut-up volumes perhaps remind us of what our culture once thought of books—and what has become of the book as ideal. ♦

BRIAN DETTMER WILL HAVE SOLO EXHIBITIONS AT GALLERIES PACKER SCHOPF, CHICAGO, AND TOOMEY TOURELL, SAN FRANCISCO, NEXT SPRING.







COURTESY THE ARTIST AND KINZ, TILLOU + FEIGEN, NEW YORK.

OPPOSITE PAGE: The abridged edition of Ruskin that Dettmer used to create *Modern Painters* (from 1987) and views of the work in progress.

THIS PAGE: *Modern Painters* (from 1987), 2008. Altered book, 9 3/8 x 6 1/2 x 1 3/4 in.