



# EXCAVATIONS

an interview with brian dettmer  
BY ZENA CARDMAN

ABOVE: BRIAN DETTMER'S *RAM SKULL*, 2007  
image courtesy of the artist and Kinz, Tillou + Feigen

*Brian Dettmer alters existing media—slicing through book pages and melting cassette tapes—to manipulate meaning and uncover new significances. Dettmer lives in Chicago. You can find more of his works online at [www.packergallery.com](http://www.packergallery.com)*

TRACT: How did you come to choose “altered book” as a medium? Did you start with collage, sculpture, or something else?

BRIAN DETTMER: I’ve always worked in multiple mediums but I when I was in school I mainly focused on painting. Most of my paintings focused on the gaps and occurrences between communication systems and the forms they take. I would use codes to create abstract fields or translate a system like Braille into a visual context. I began using newspapers and then eventually book pages to apply to the surface of the canvas. I liked the idea that, even though it was indecipherable, the actual information was on the surface, stripped down to its tactility. As it became less comprehensible it became more universal. These pieces led me to ripping up books in my studio and I began to look at the actual books as a richly interesting raw material.

TRACT: Do you flip through the book ahead of time to get an idea of what you want your final product to be, or do you just seal the book up and start digging?

BRIAN DETTMER: I always browse through the book to make sure it will work well for what I want to do but I don’t plan or bookmark anything. The content and design have to work for me and occasionally I’ll flip through before I seal up the book and find an image I hope I come across when I begin working but I really can’t plan anything and the element of chance is important to me. Sometimes I’ll have an idea and search for a book that will fit what I have pictured and sometimes I will find a book that inspires a fitting way to approach it.

TRACT: The result is mind-boggling. How long does it take?

BRIAN DETTMER: The work is very time intensive. They aren’t really about time as much as they are about memory and the parallels between the linear dictation of a book’s form and the way we understand and measure time. I try to put enough work into the piece to be able to hijack it, to be able to call it my own. I need to balance my interventions with the work it already contains to transform it into something new.

TRACT: I’ve read that you use surgical tools to create your artwork. Do you think of it as a scientific or surgical process?

I LIKE THE IDEA OF APPROACHING CULTURE THE WAY SCIENTISTS HAVE TRADITIONALLY EXPLORED NATURE.

I begin to work. This way the material has more potential to dictate the outcome and the results are exciting. Images and words have a tendency to slip from field to field when they are extracted from their original context and very sterile, scientific elements can become very poetic and relevant in new ways when they are exposed in a new context.

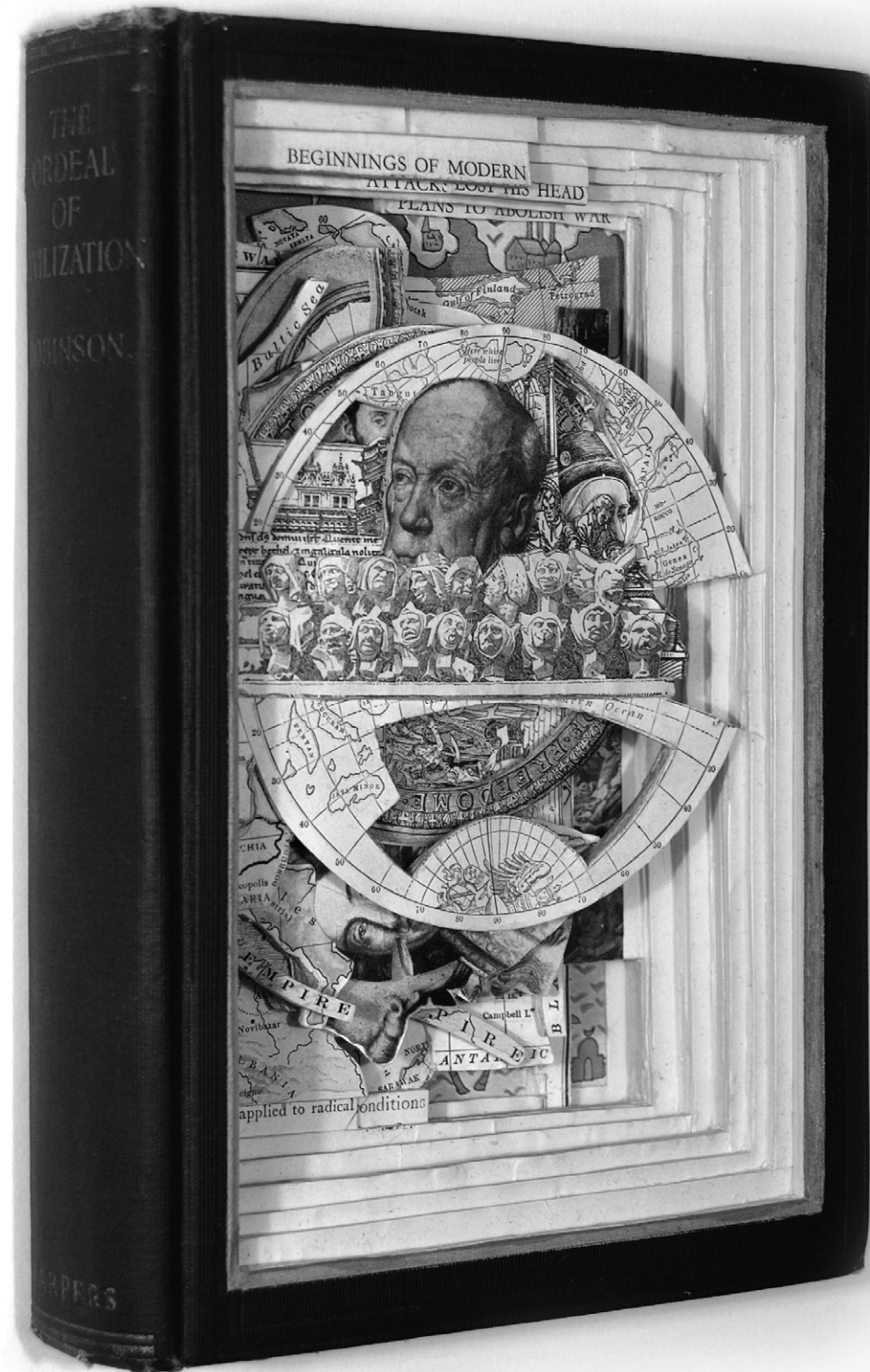
TRACT: Does the type of book you start with affect how you work with it?

BRIAN DETTMER: Yes. The type of book will affect the way I look at it and the way I think about approaching it. I cut through one page at a time so it is very much like reading in a way. I also think of the book as a body or as a terrain or as a memory and I explore and expose content while thinking or my process as a fitting approach; a dissection, an excavation or an exploration. The form and the material will also affect the outcome. Some books are very pulpy and lend themselves to be treated like wood in a more sculptural way and some books want to remain flatter and more pictorial. I will also push the form to echo and idea inspired by the actual content or by my idea of how the information is transferred.

TRACT: I notice that many of your works began with dictionaries or scientific textbooks. Do you prefer reference books?

BRIAN DETTMER: I think that reference books are the most threatened by newer forms of media like the internet. Non-linear information has traditionally had to conform to the linear form of the book. Individual elements have been categorically or alphabetically arranged but their content and proximity has no meaningful relationship. My alteration can begin to suggest this randomness and also tie disparate elements together. I have worked with some fictional books to suggest what is happening with literature today. I'm revealing (not copying) and exposing (not pasting) fragments and patches to make something my own. I have also worked with old comic books, exposing the odd relationships between the characters, the different potential narratives and the formulas and repetition of the actual format. Most of the material I work with is from about 1920 – 1970. I like the idea of a

BRIAN DETTMER: I do think of it as a dissection or excavation, both literally and metaphorically. We take things apart in order to be able to understand them and I like the idea of approaching culture the way scientists have traditionally explored nature. In a way, I try to remove myself from the system; I try to approach the subject as an outsider, which seems very scientific to me. I also like the idea of setting up rules for myself before



RIGHT: DETTMER'S *THE ORDEAL OF CIVILIZATION*, 2007  
image courtesy of the artist and Toomey Tourell Gallery



ABOVE: *LOG 1* BY BRIAN DETTMER, 2007  
image courtesy of the artist and Haydee Rovirosa Gallery

book having a previous life and the less functional it is now, the more potential it has to become something new.

TRACT: So have you worked with fiction, poetry, phone books, religious texts, comic books, or fashion magazines?

BRIAN DETTMER: I have worked with some fictional books to suggest what is happening with literature today. I'm revealing (not copying) and exposing (not pasting) fragments and patches to make something my own. I have also worked with old comic books, exposing the odd relationships between the characters, the different potential narratives and the formulas and repetition of the actual format. Most of the material I work with is from about 1920 – 1970. I like the idea of a book having a previous life and the less functional it is now, the more potential it has to become something new.

TRACT: Have you ever been told that cutting up books is sacrilege? How would you respond to someone accusing your art of being destructive?

BRIAN DETTMER: I've never had anyone tell me they were offended in person. I like to think that I put enough energy and idea into my work to justify the fact that I am ending its previous life. I have seen bloggers post comments that they are upset but I haven't had to respond. The irony is that they are venting within the media responsible for the current state of the book. I don't think books are dead but they have lost their monopoly and along with that their obligations are freed up and they are open to new routes.

TRACT: Your artwork creates connections between elements that may have once been hundreds of pages apart. Do you try to create meaning from the words and images that you reveal, or is it purely aesthetic?

BRIAN DETTMER: Everything I expose had meaning and continues to have meaning even if the original context is hidden. The meanings of the elements shift and may point out the randomness of our experiences or they may suggest new connections. I always think about what I'm using and how it relates to its new context. I don't try to push my own agenda into the work but I do try to expose the book's hidden meanings. Sometime they are random or universal and the viewer creates a meaning of their own and that is part of the work also.

TRACT: You also create spectacular skulls and skeletons from melted cassette tapes.

BRIAN DETTMER: I like the idea of working with materials that have had a previous life and that may be threatened by newer forms. Books, cassettes, records and

other forms of physical media are all being threatened by newer, faster, and smaller forms. Our information is becoming less tangible; it is slipping from our physical world. We are left with objects that are meaningful but not as functional as they used to be.

TRACT: Why cassettes?

BRIAN DETTMER: The cassette is an exoskeleton to the music it contains. I think we all become the materials we consume. These objects were created to fit the formats of our body, to relate to us physically and that is becoming lost.

TRACT: And your choice of skeletal sculptures relates to the fact that the cassette is a “dead” medium?

BRIAN DETTMER: Yes, the dead medium is the quick connection. There is also the idea of the plastic as the exoskeleton for the living music, the threats of piracy, and the fetishization of all things rebellious in rock music. The connections fit together in so many different ways that the materials just asked to be exposed in a new way.

TRACT: Ever get the urge to work with typewriters or floppy discs or vinyl records?

BRIAN DETTMER: I have worked with records before and I’ve thought about floppy disks but haven’t done anything with them yet. I like working with materials that have an existing meaning that can suggest its new meanings and associations. I’m also amazed by the idea that the black plastic of a record, a VHS tape, or a cassette actually contains the music. The more technology evolves, the greater the disconnect between its form and its content- and eventually it becomes completely formless.

TRACT: What’s up next for you?

BRIAN DETTMER: Right now I’m working on some stop-motion videos of my book work. I am taking a still shot every time I remove a layer and the result will look like a time-lapse excavation of the piece. Adding the dimension of time exposes the process and the exploration. It becomes more about the journey and less about the final product.

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LEFT: *SKULL #11 (80s Metal)* BY BRIAN DETTMER, 2007  
image courtesy of the artist and Packer Schopf Gallery