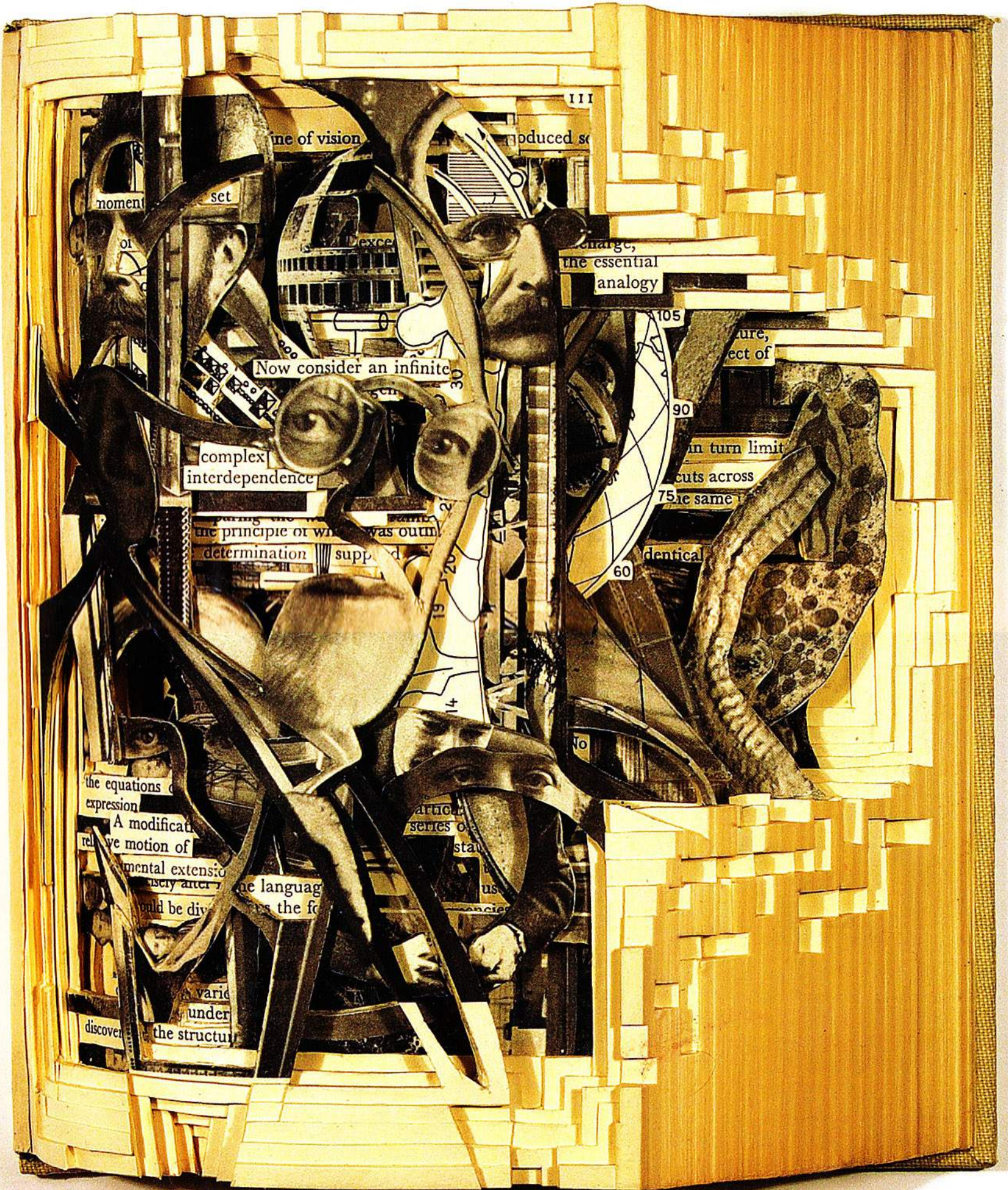
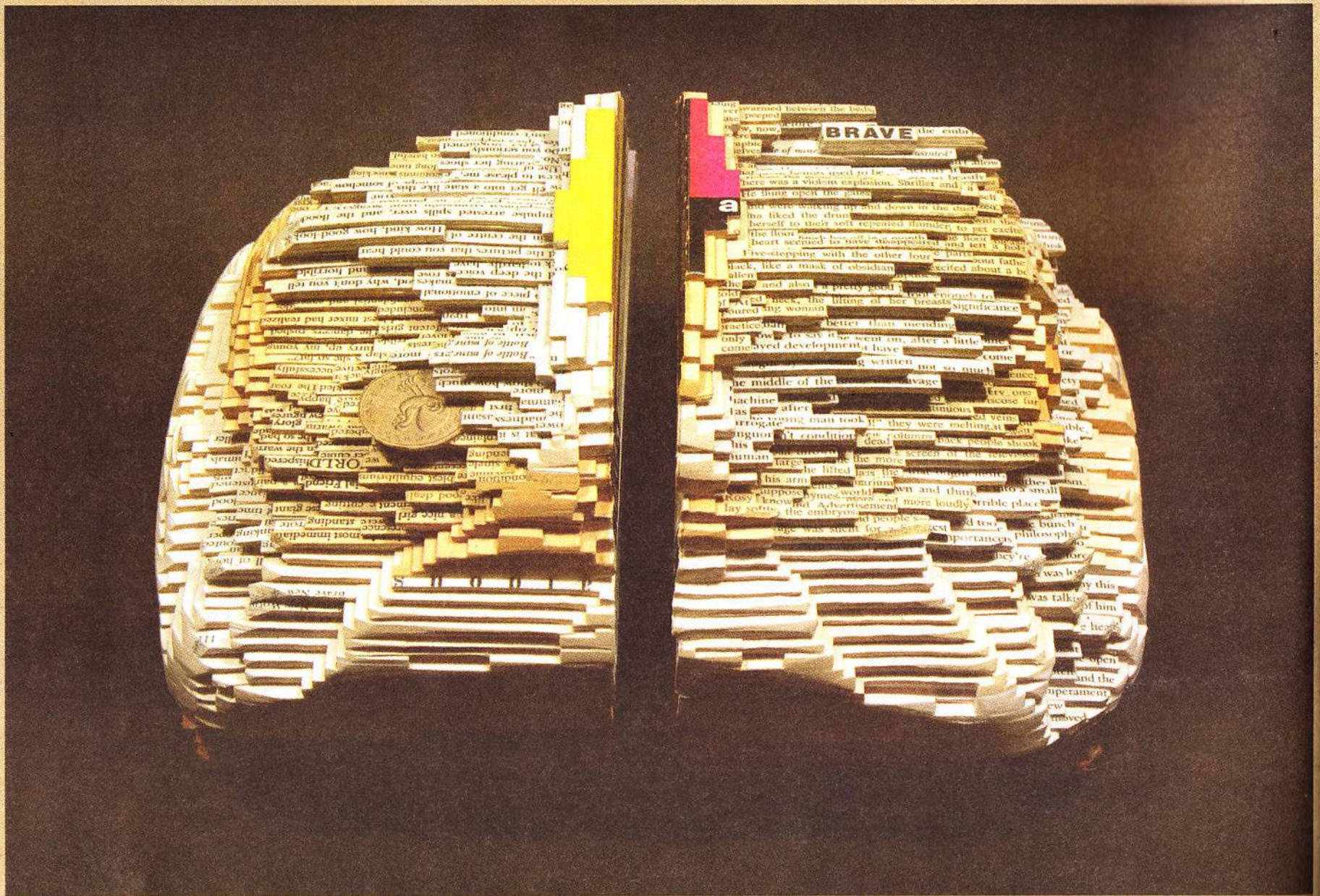


# BLISS

MAGAZINE





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# BRIAN DETTMER

Interview: Brian Holcombe

Brian Dettmer explores the physical history of information. As technology evolves, how we package, share and preserve information shifts. Dettmer's medium is the artifact left behind. Since 2003, Dettmer has worked primarily with books – forming, shaping and cutting. He repurposes the book's information to create a visual snapshot of its history. I recently spoke with Dettmer in his Atlanta studio, surrounded by works in progress for his upcoming solo exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia.

**You make sculptures by altering books. Writers have referred to you as the "book surgeon." Is that title an accurate description to your process?**

I think the term "book surgeon" is metaphorically limited but it's also just inaccurate to describe my process and the shift an actual book goes through in my work. I am investigating, critiquing and literally dissecting or excavating the book as I carve through; but the idea of surgery, the idea that I am making a calculated incision to fix a specific interior problem, isn't an accurate analogy for what is happening.

**What are the factors behind the selection of books you work with?**

The first thing I look at is the overall feeling of the book, its specific history and the evidence of its previous life. I make sure the images, structure of the book and even the paper type will work for my process. More importantly, I want to use material that was vital and relevant in its time but is no longer as functional in our current ecosystem of information. Most of the books I use are non-fiction. They are the first to go since information needs to be constantly updated and the structure of the internet is more apt to go directly to an idea and make multiple connections from there. I also want the content of the book, or the form it takes, to become a metaphor for its current position in our culture and for my process of intervention.



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**Do you consider the element of chance in discovering your source material?**

Chance plays a large role in my work. I seal the edges of the book and don't plan before I begin to carve so it becomes an honest collaboration between me and the existing material. The finished work is a document of the discovery rather than a contrived composition. I carve into the surface and remove one layer at a time and I don't move or add anything to the existing work. I can't control what will emerge on the next layer, only the way I react to it so there is a high level of chance in the results. This makes it exciting for me while I work; it's like reading, but I think it also brings the content back to a truer, more experiential form. We experience random images or chance events in our lives every day. The plot, or narrative, is a construct we apply after the fact in order to understand or explain a series of events. I believe in cause and effect, but the level of chance in our lives is understated by our desire to tell stories.

**Does the structure of written language influence your work?**

Yes, in many ways. The form of the book and its sequential pages are the perfect form for a long, linear narrative. It is a literary structure built for a steady duration; space and time are parallel. When we need to organize a series of connecting ideas, a list of unique definitions, or an evolving cloud of concepts, linear narratives become restraining and the form of the book begins to fall apart. I try to address this in my work. I'm also interested in the fluidity of language; the way an isolated word or idea can function like an image and the way language in a specific genre, say medicine or mechanics, can take on new meaning when it's exposed in a new context.

**In what ways does the content of the book determine the aesthetic of the finished work?**

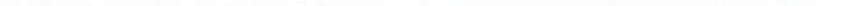
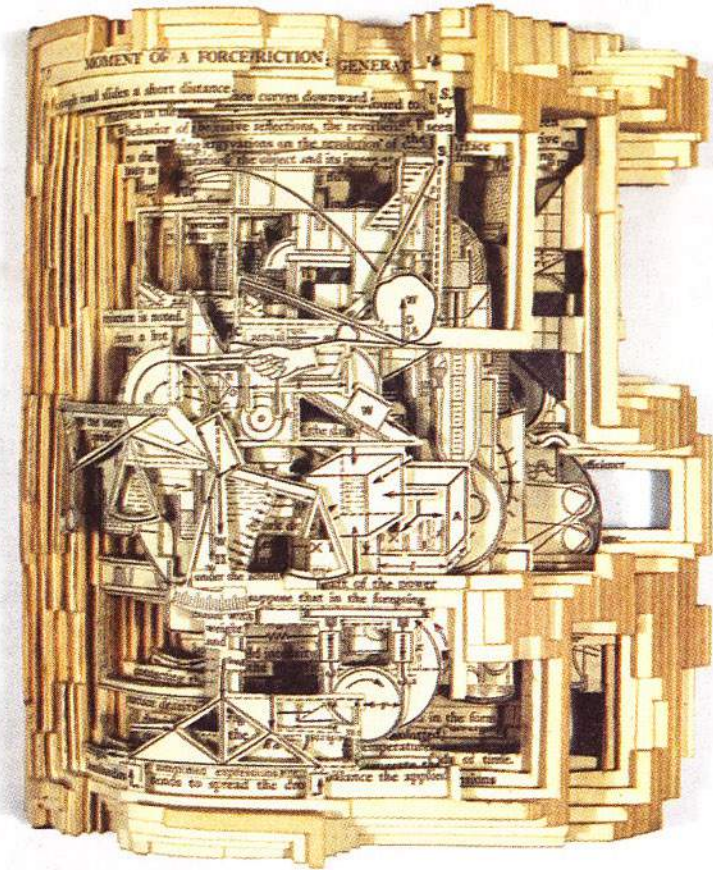
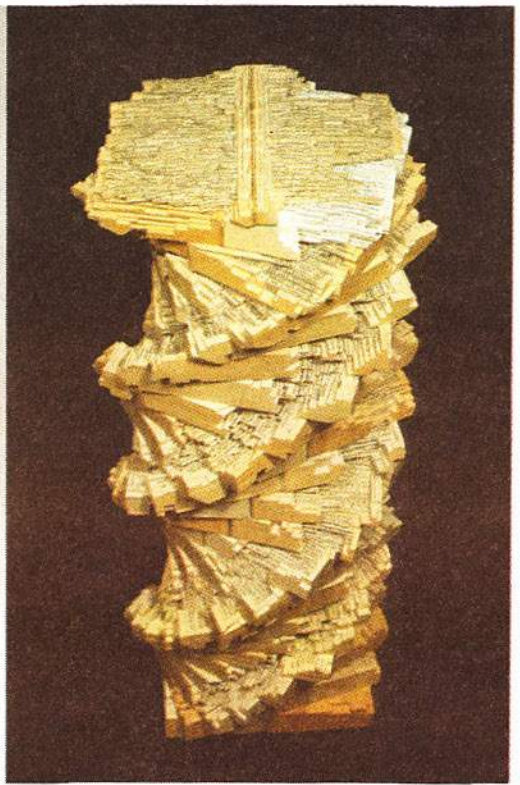
Since the imagery in my work is directly from the actual book there is a direct connection between the content of the book and the aesthetic of the finished piece. Form and content are far removed between a book and its meaning, but by having the book's content direct the interior form my work takes I like to think that my work brings from and content back together. A geometry book, with structural forms and organized lines of equations, will become a very structured and graphic piece; whereas a book on natural history, filled with softer colors and natural forms, will evolve into a work with more fluidity and organic clusters.

**Do you think of your sculptures as narrative?**

There is a narrative: the story I am telling right now, the presumed activity behind the creation of the work, and the story of the book's history and its role in our current information ecosystem. In this sense, any art can be considered narrative. The content in my work has been broken from the narrative so it now floats and fluctuates between narration and a more tactile or visual experience of textures and ideas. It could be considered post-narrative (literally) or pre-narrative since we all have the tendency to make connections and construct meaning from a series or cluster of chance events or images.

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**Did you always work with books?**  
I have been working with books since about 2001. Before I began to work with books I was working on a series of paintings involving codes and language so my work has always involved ideas of text, connections and disconnections between art and communication.

my process creates surrounding reading, learning and memory. Because of this, I am very open about my process and I want the viewer to understand how the piece was developed to a degree. The work takes on more meaning when a viewer understands how it came about. I do want the work to work on many levels and I want to draw a viewer in because they don't understand and want to learn more.

**Who influenced your work to consider found objects as sculptural material?**

Ever since Duchamp, I think the idea of a found object as a sculptural material has been a given. Rauschenberg was also a big influence on the way I view art making. When I began to work with books I was familiar with the work of Buzz Spector and Melissa Jay-Craig, both are artists from Chicago that work with the book in different ways. So, I was familiar with the book as something that could be approached as an art material and subject. I also love the early work of Tom Friedman. Seeing his work really illustrated how an object's existing function or history can take on new meaning through a simple alteration or intervention.

**Do you have anything against collage?**

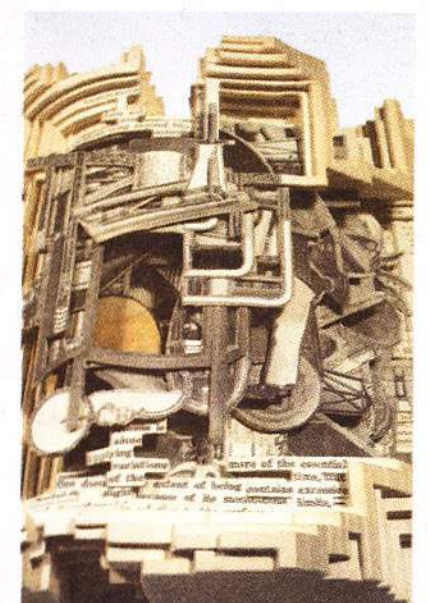
I don't. I think collage is the most relevant art process of our time. Most art is derived from a collection of previous work, either literally or conceptually, and now that cutting and pasting are a given in the digital realm it seems to be the primary means of production for a lot of interesting work happening today. My work could be called Décollage. This is a term that has been credited to Mimmo Rotella, an Italian artist known for his ripped, layered posters in the 1950s. Instead of being built up of existing images, it is created by cutting or tearing away. The result of décollage is really collage the way anti-art is really art.

**New viewers of your sculptures have often assumed the pieces are constructed collages, and they are surprised to discover your process is reductive. Is creating this surprise a conscious element in the work?**

I'm not as concerned with the element of surprise as I am with the metaphors

**Is your creativity limited by working under the constraints of using only the material of the book?**

I don't think so. A lot of people assume it would be limited and ask me what is next, but I think there are an infinite number of ways the book can be



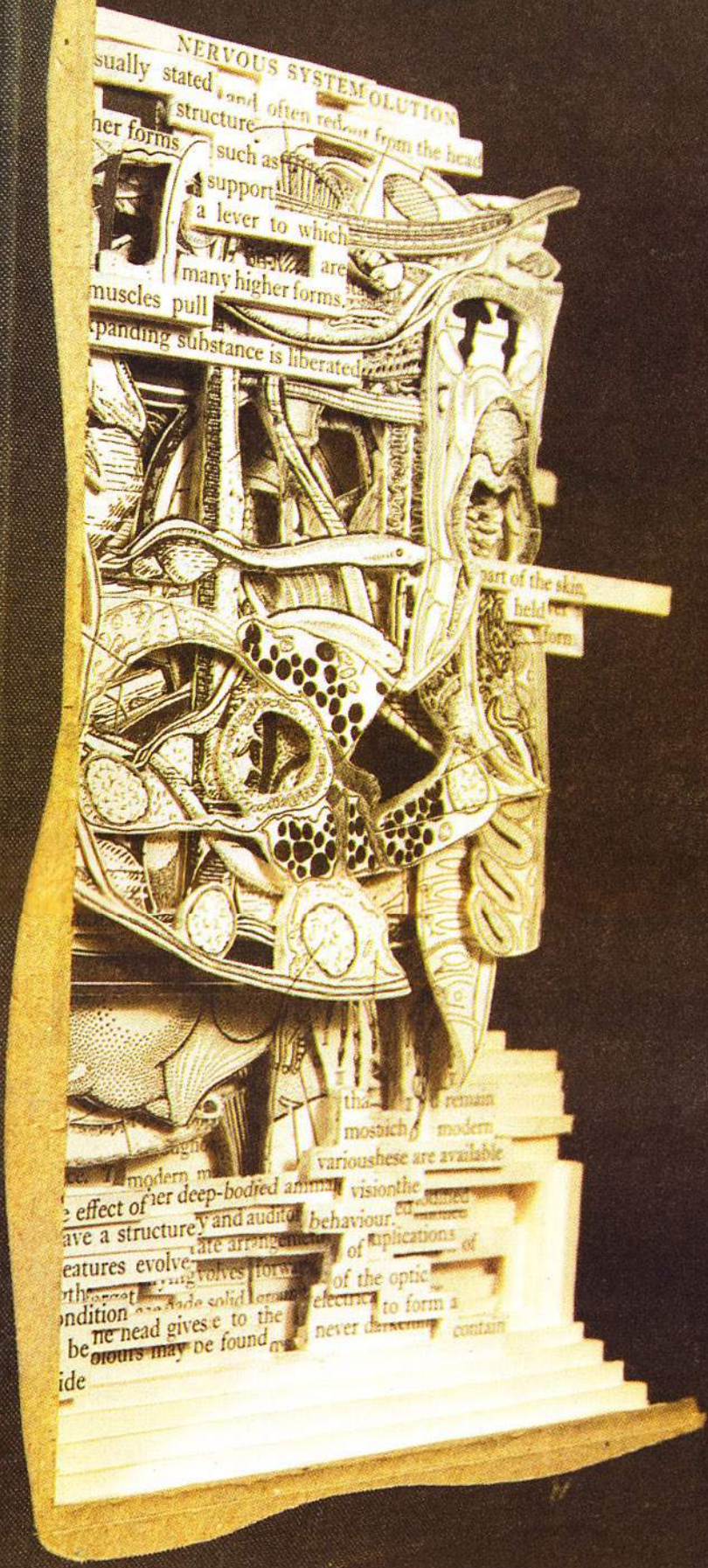
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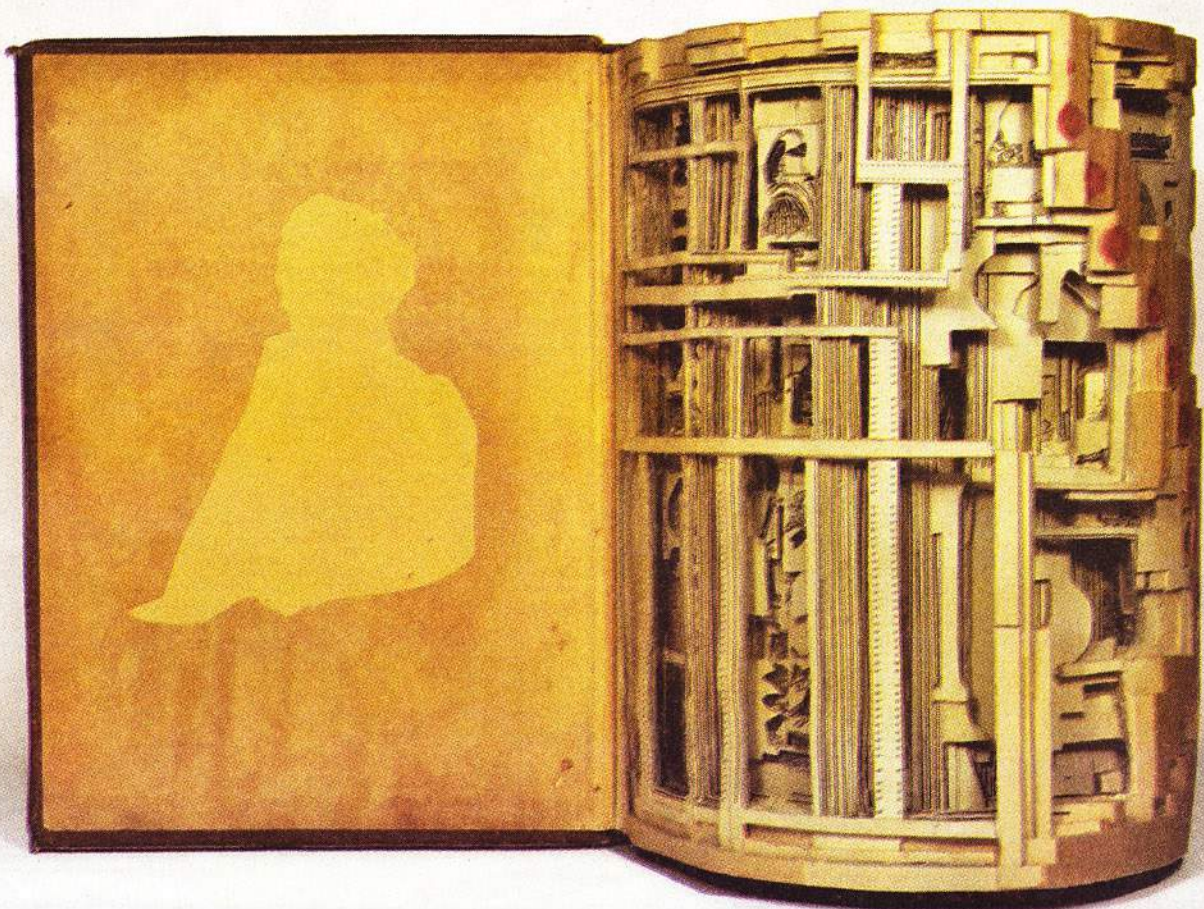


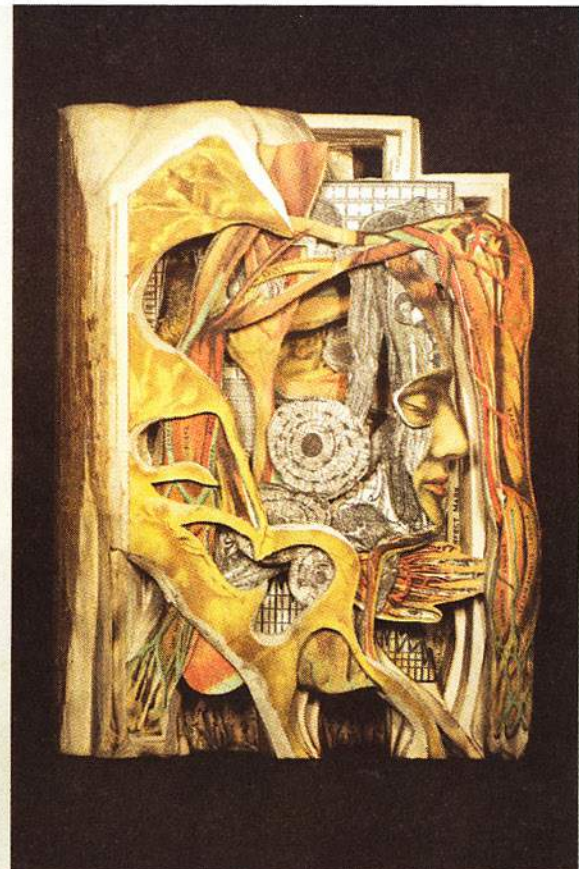
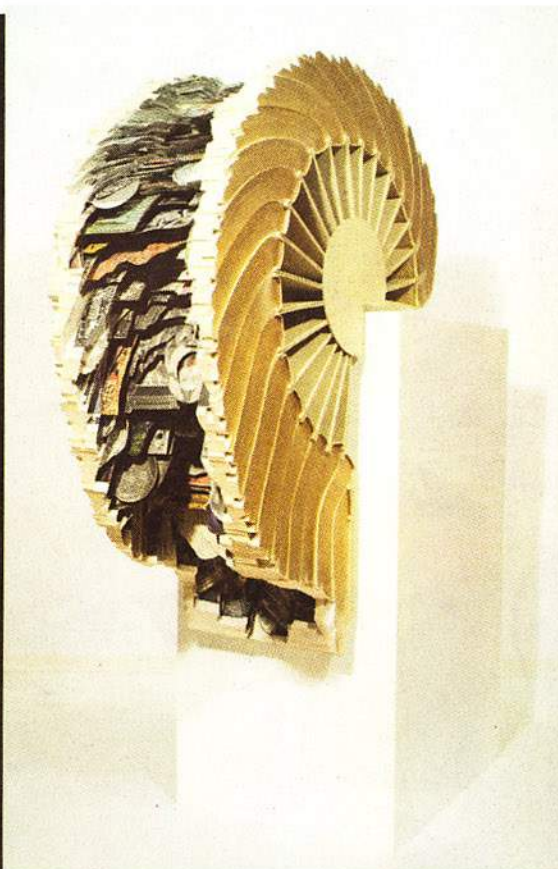
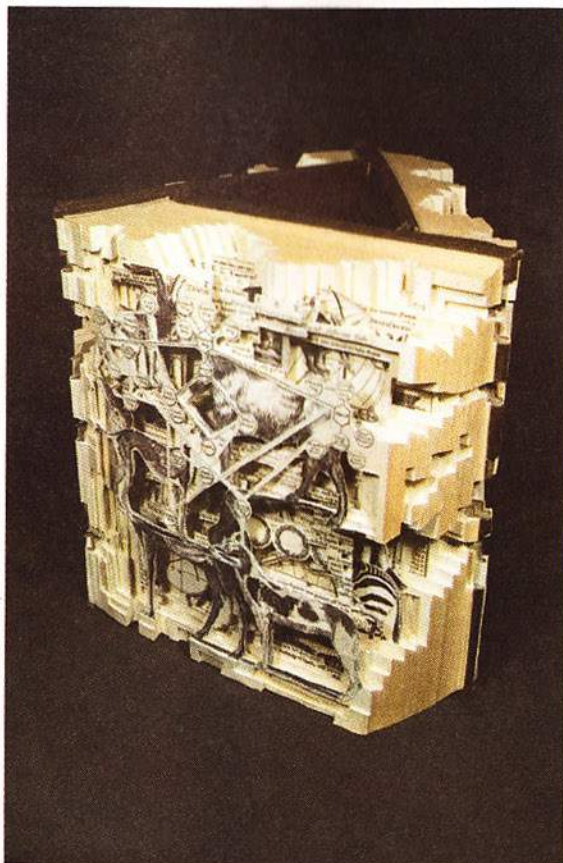
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approached and explored. I have been working on a large print that is about language and the content is from a book, but it isn't made of the physical material of a book. I think the material and its subject are unlimited and very relevant given the recent shifts in the way we receive information.

**After visiting your studio, I realized that the larger sculptures involve a considerable amount of engineering to assemble before you make your first cut. Is there a limit to the scale of the sculpture? How does architecture play into the work?**

Every time I think of a new form I want a set or series of books to take I have a new set of physical restraints and structural issues I need to resolve in order to make the piece work. Since I am doing something that has never been done before, there is no model to follow. I am constantly experimenting and inventing ways for the work to physically work. It can be exciting and frustrating. I want to push the form as far as possible while still keeping the material identifiable as a book. It is important for scale, but also for the ability to push the metaphors within the forms the books take. There is a lot of architecture that goes into the formation of my work but also within any book itself, the structural design, graphic design and the way the information is organized within a book. These all become the architecture I try to expose from within.

**What is the significance of the totem structure?**

I have recently been working on a series of tall, totemic structures. I want the books to take on a form that suggests a cultural tower, an icon or tribute. I also like the idea that the books are being presented like an artifact in a natural history museum; as something that had a function in a different culture or period in time but is now revered or appreciated for its history, the story behind it and its rich textures, aesthetic properties and cultural significance.

**What are you working on now?**

Right now I'm working on a series of small alterations (you could even call them collages) from book pages of U.S. state flags. I like the idea of doing the minimum intervention to get the maximum message. Each page will be cut and folded to become something new. There will be visible clues and ties to the original print. They will be small prototypes for sculptures that would be illegal if I did them with real flags. It's about the freedom of speech issues that come from dissent and the odd idiosyncrasies that come from state laws and local cultures.

To see more of Brian Dettmer, go to [briandettmer.com](http://briandettmer.com). Brian Holcombe is the Founder and Director of SALTWORKS, a contemporary art gallery specializing in content-driven work from emerging to mid-career interdisciplinary artists that is located in Atlanta, GA. For more information, visit [www.saltworksgallery.com](http://www.saltworksgallery.com)

