



The Cut Up Artist

By: *Ellen Firsching Brown*

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Brian Dettmer is a sculptor, but he doesn't carve wood or marble. The preferred targets for his scalpel are encyclopedias, dictionaries, textbooks, and atlases. For the sake of his art, he is not shy about wreaking havoc on books. He bends their covers back until they touch or shears them off entirely. He then glues the pages together and bores into them and sorts out their innards. Dettmer, thirty-three years old, has exhibited at art fairs around the world and, over the last year, has had shows in fine-art galleries in Chicago, San Francisco, and Barcelona. (He has another opening soon in New York.) The New York Times has twice commissioned him to create original works to illustrate articles in its magazine supplements. He even will be profiled in an upcoming issue of *Italian Vogue*. This level of attention is all the more impressive given that two years ago Dettmer held a full-time job, and he worked on his art only on evenings and weekends. "It wasn't until this past year that things exploded," he told me during a recent telephone conversation. He sounded a bit overwhelmed by all of the attention he has received since last summer. "Things have been quicker than I can keep up with," he said. What makes Dettmer's story interesting, other than its Horatio Alger appeal, is how he managed to catch the eye of the fine arts world with book altering a relatively obscure art form that has been around since the 1960s. The sudden popularity of Dettmer's work may be a sign that book altering is breaking through to the mainstream. How Dettmer reached this point is a testament to his keen eye for the beauty of workaday books, his willingness to keep at it, and the power of the World Wide Web to popularize an unknown artist.

Dettmer majored in fine arts at Columbia College in Chicago, focusing mainly on painting and sculpture. In his final year of school, he began to incorporate language into his art. At the time, he held a part-time job at a sign shop. "Working with signs made me think about language in a more philosophical way. I began seeing letters and text as objects," he explained. He became interested in how language is disconnected from what it represents and began incorporating textual references into his paintings. "I was exploring the old cliché about art being the universal language," he said.

After graduating in 1997, Dettmer held various jobs that allowed him to continue blending his interests in art and text. After managing the sign shop for a spell, he worked as a graphic-shop supervisor at the Field Museum, where he designed signs and exhibits. He later went on to work at an architectural signage company developing directional systems for hotels, hospitals, and college campuses. Dettmer said each of these jobs influenced his artistic vision by teaching him to appreciate the aesthetics of everyday items and the value of fine details.

During his off-hours, Dettmer continued creating art that incorporated codes and language systems, exploring "translations between different mediums" such as Braille and Morse code. He began using newspapers to create textured fields on his canvases. He would tear newspapers apart and apply the shredded pieces to the surface of his paintings with acrylic gesso, a medium used to prime canvases. He let the pieces dry in place and then ripped them off, leaving fragments of the text behind. He did this over and over until only an illegible tangle of words remained. He was pleased with the effect. "I liked the idea that the surface contained the information and that ideas were turning into marks or suggestions," he explained in a recent e-mail.

From newspapers, he turned to pages torn from books. He recalls one early work that incorporated different versions of Huckleberry Finn. "It was more relevant and more powerful with actual books," he explained. "The content was more controlled and intentional."

In 2000, Dettmer turned his creative talents to a stack of left over books. He glued them together, painted them a uniform black, and then he gouged out a jagged hole. The result of this experiment was as if a small bomb had detonated destroying the interior of the books. Dettmer described the work as "a meditation on the dichotomy of learning through reading versus learning through experience." Excavating the text, he said, refers to "a more tactile way of learning by actually having an experience with the material"

For his next series of experiments, Dettmer glued the page edges of books together to create a solid block with the idea of carving geometric patterns into them. A bit of serendipity changed his course. "I was playing around with a block I had made out of an old encyclopedia. As I carved down through the cover and into the text, I came across an image of a landscape. I left it in place and carved around it. A few pages down, another figure emerged." He left that one in place as well and continued on cutting through the pages, selectively revealing images and text. Dettmer had found what would become his signature technique.

This manner of exposing fragments of books, Dettmer said, reflects the way we receive information in real life, through bits and pieces, as juxtaposed with how stories are told linearly in books. When I asked him what he calls this technique, he was reluctant to place a label on the process. "It depends on the content of the book," he said. "My carving becomes a metaphor for what I'm doing. When I use a history book, I think of it as a reinvestigation or study of how history is told. Archeology books become excavations; anatomy books, dissections."

What appeals to him most about this technique is the element of chance involved. Before carving, he does not preselect the images that will be revealed in the finished piece or even formulate what the piece will look like. "I seal the book before I begin so I have no control over what will emerge," he explained. "I go from the top (or front) and go one layer (or page) at a time." While it is certainly a painstaking process that does not allow much room for error, he said there "is some push and pull like painting." As the work develops and he finds areas that are "imbalanced" or do not "feel right," he will go back and carve something else out to develop that area further. But, he assured me, he never moves any of the images or adds anything. "There's a kind of a truth to that," he said. "I am just responding to whatever images are worth exposing or worth discarding." He likened it to being on a long car ride and wondering what is around the next bend. "What's exciting for me is that I have no idea what's coming up or what's on the next page."

In studying Dettmer's sculptures in close detail, I could not help but wonder at the level of concentration such work must require. He can spend a week or more in his sound-filled studio, bent over a single book with his knife and a pair of tweezers. "When I work on my art, my eyes and hands are busy but my ears are open." He listens to music, National Public Radio, and "a lot of audio books, so that's reading in a way," he said.

In 2002, Dettmer showed a few of his book sculptures to Aron Packer, a finearts dealer in Chicago. Packer told me that he was immediately taken in. "It was a visceral response," he said about his decision to let Dettmer show a few pieces in a back room. When the sculptures sold, he invited Dettmer to participate in a group show at the gallery and eventually gave him his first solo show in 2003.

Another turning point came when the Argentinean artist Maximo Gonzalez noticed Dettmer's work and recommended him to a New York gallery. From there, Dettmer's pieces started to make the rounds of international art fairs and galleries. By 2006, the altered books were selling well enough for Dettmer to quit his job and focus full-time on his art. It was not long before his name began generating a buzz on the Internet. "There must've been a lot of bloggers at these things," Dettmer said, referring to the fairs and gallery shows. "Suddenly, my name started popping up all over the Internet." He said that things really took off when "three or four really big websites," including the influential blog Boing Boing, featured his work.

Despite his success, Dettmer acknowledged that his work is not universally palatable. "Some people really are upset," he said. He pointed me to several blogs critical of his techniques. One described his work as "absolutely abhorrent!" Another called it "a rip-off," objecting to Dettmer's profiting from the work of the illustrators who originally

created the images revealed in Dettmer's sculptures. Dettmer is sensitive to the idea that books are precious objects.

"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," he said. While newspapers are temporary, books have a permanent quality and "some people feel or believe that by tearing the book up you are destroying those ideas." He continued: "The flip side is that most books are mass produced objects and are often discarded." As a child, he grew up across the street from a school where he remembers the dumpster being full of discarded books. "I couldn't believe they were throwing out these books," he recalled. As Dettmer sees it, his work is providing new relevance to books that might otherwise be thrown away. "That future isn't any better than what I am doing with them."

He pointed out that most of the books he works with are decades old and are of little interest to the reading public. He prefers to work with nonfiction, which tends to get dated and to have less practical value in to day's world. He also avoids selecting books that might be collectable. "I am not going to work on a particular book to create controversy. That's not what my work is about," he said.

Dettmer suggested that the critics who question his use of preexisting text and images have perhaps misunderstood what he is doing. He is not attempting to take credit for the underlying images revealed through his work. "It's clear that I didn't create these images. What is important is that people understand that it comes from a book and that this is my modification." He also responded to the idea that he is riding on the coattails of other artists. "I feel a certain amount of obligation to justify my work so that I can call it my own. I need to put enough into it so that my work balances the original content." He likened his altered books to hip-hop songs that borrow from the music of an earlier generation.

Regardless of any controversy associated with his work, or perhaps because of it, Dettmer may be one of the only people in the world who makes a living altering books. He reports that his last four solo shows have mostly sold out. (Prices range between \$2,400 and \$4,800.) "With more than four galleries that are constantly selling my work and asking for more, the pace is quicker than I can keep up with," he told me. Not that he's complaining. "It can be stressful, but I have a hard time finding people who will sympathize," he said.

Is Brian Dettmer's commercial success a sign that altered books are finding a new credibility in the fine-arts world? I asked Aron Packer whether, as an art dealer, he had harbored any hesitation about displaying altered books. "Not at all," he replied. "It's sculpture. Books just happen to be the things that Brian's hottest for." At the same time, Packer admits Dettmer is one of the few altered-book artists whose work has struck such a chord with him. (Packer has only shown pieces by one other book alterer, Robert The.)

I was curious about what made Dettmer's work stand out from the myriad other talented artists altering books today. "People have been cutting books at least since the 1960s," Packer said. "Yet, somehow Brian's work immediately makes you go, 'Oh wow, that's pretty interesting.'" He attributes that to Dettmer's meticulous attention to

detail and the effort he has put into refining his technique. Packer suggested that the Internet also has had a role to play in Dettmer's success. "Brian is smart. He takes good photographs of his work, uses nice angles. These images read well on the Internet, and people have really responded." Dettmer's work has picked up "a cool factor," he said.

"Brian's work appeals to every kind of person," Packer told me. In particular, he noted that "artists turn on to [his books], and design people like them a lot. And, of course, there are the art-book collectors." It also does not hurt, he added that "depending on the size, his works are moderately affordable as far as collecting art goes."

Dettmer is not sure exactly what the secret is to his success. He suspects the appeal has something to do with the commonality of books. "I am working with something that everybody can recognize or understand and appreciate at some level," he said.

Is he worried about being seen as a one trick pony? "I never want to limit the materials I work with," he said, pointing out that he does other types of work, including sculptures fashioned from old cassettes and videotapes. Yet, he has no intention of abandoning book altering any time soon. As he sees it, "the possibilities are endless."

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