

# FrameWork 11/18

Shannon Garden-Smith on Derek Sullivan

I bound up the zig-zagging set of escalators, shifting into a desperate jog-slide as I hit the friction-free tile floor of the atrium and enter the store.

Locking eyes with the nearest t-shirted agent, I manage breathlessly:

“I’m here for my 11:15.”

Jarringly, the woman’s freneticism exceeds mine, as she instructs me to wend my way to her equally overextended associate in yellow. Shauna consults her database, checks me in, and directs me to a stool at the blond-wood “bar” in the rearmost area of the luminous showroom. I take my seat at the table, joining the established clusters of twosomes, bodies angled toward one another as they talk in intimate tones. I sense the furniture’s desire to capture that “light...fresh...and unpretentious” ethos—the same received design principles articulated by IKEA, for example, and dovetailed explicitly with a “healthy way of life.”<sup>1</sup>

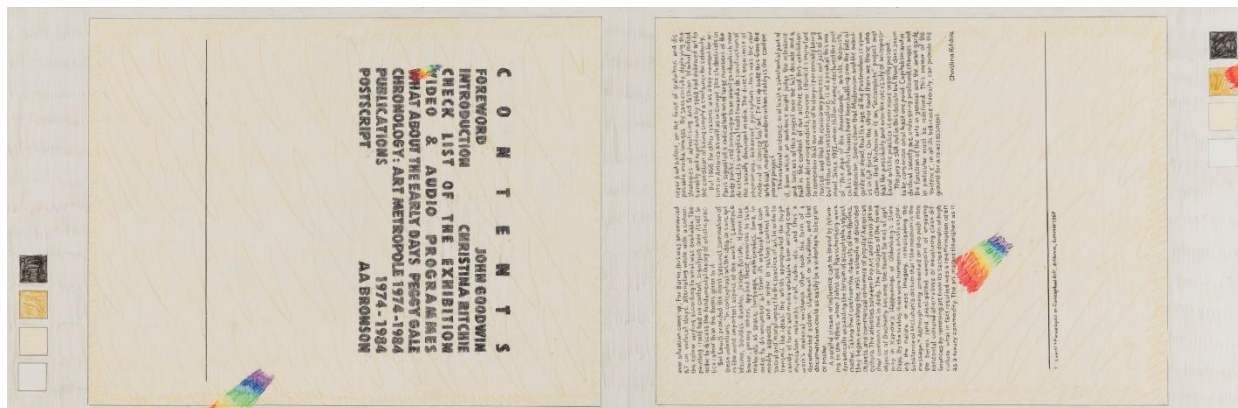
My Genius introduces himself as Dan, apologizing for making me wait and settling into the stool next to mine. I take a deep breath aiming to reshape my exhaustion into affability. I need a favourable hardware repair plan for my ageing MacBook Pro—the one I bought almost two years ago to the day after fatally dropping its predecessor during Art Toronto weekend. The keyboard won’t work, and so I’ve been nomadically seeking—in the uncanny terrain of friends’ computers or in the sacrilegious space of a work desktop—the intimate psychological space of writing.

Dan runs me through the proposed scheme, and I consent, proffering a finger-painted signature on his tablet. I hand-over my laptop to join the other one-hundred-forty devices in the queue. It will be Tuesday before I get it back—too late for my current needs, but, still, we share a laugh at the bravado of the “genius bar”—a name I’d be curious to hear Linda Nochlin’s thoughts on. With a practiced, tactfully professional line, Dan lets me know he’s on my side re: this corporate naming ;) before recommending a few really useful Apple apps that he’s found a lot of customers have just never heard of.

It’s the second time I’ve been to 220 Yonge St., the Cadillac Fairview Toronto Eaton Centre, in six days, on the off-chance of landing an elusive walk-in tech-support appointment. Today I catch a glance of a window display heavily indebted to post-minimal sculpture, but sometimes when I’m there I think about my Dad’s recollected teenaged excitement at the opening of the shopping mall in the late 1970s. The building would prove an exemplary model for subsequent retail architecture,

<sup>1</sup> “The IKEA Concept.” *IKEA*, [www.ikea.com/ms/en\\_SG/about\\_ikea/the\\_ikea\\_way/swedish\\_heritage/index.html](http://www.ikea.com/ms/en_SG/about_ikea/the_ikea_way/swedish_heritage/index.html).

earning Canada a place on the international map.<sup>2</sup> He's told me about how he visited the construction site prior to the opening of Phase 1 in 1977, the same year the Toronto Reference Library opened its doors as the Metropolitan Reference Library. It's where I'm heading next, seeking out a copy of *Evidence of the Avant-Garde since 1957: Selected Works from the Collection of Art Metropole Including Audiotapes, Records, Videotapes, Film, Multiples, Kitsch, Manuscripts, Stamps, Buttons, Flyers, Posters, Correspondence, Catalogues, Porn, T-Shirts, Postcards, Drawings, Poems, Mailers, Books, Photographs and Ephemera*, the publication Derek Sullivan's exhibition ¶ \* † ‡ engages intimately in a suite of six poster-drawings replicating its contents. Released in 1984 to accompany Art Metropole's 10th anniversary celebration/exhibition, the catalogue looks back at the materials collected from AM's beginning, a few years before but more or less contemporary with the opening of these two era-defining Yonge St. buildings. As an archive, the publication forms "a descriptive field of [then] contemporary artistic and cultural concerns."<sup>3</sup> It's a backward glance seeking to "evidence" the period. Sullivan's adamantly hand-drawn facsimile of the book renders its content in the form of discrete printer's signatures—flat sheets that contain multiple pages on both recto and verso—although Sullivan offers us only a single side of the sheet here. Once folded and trimmed, these ostensibly form the innards of the book. Through the form of the signature, Sullivan rearranges time, sequence, and comprehensible orientation. It is a form that suggests a *before* compounded with a double backward look: the first by Art Metropole in 1984 and a second by Sullivan's body of work in our timely present.



I'm viewing the drawings, seated in one of the eight hand-painted Arne Jacobsen Series 7 chairs Sullivan has scattered throughout the gallery. Frequently cited as the most copied chair in the world since its debut in 1955 Sweden—just prior to the moment *Evidence of the Avant-Garde* delimits as the starting point for their contemporary epoch—it's a chair Jacobsen "wrote history with," (as one Modernist design store pithily synopsis<sup>4</sup>). From this seat, my desire to turn the copied content of

<sup>2</sup> "The Eaton Centre, Toronto (designed by the Zeidler Partnership and Bregman and Hamann, phase 1 opening in 1977, phase 2 in 1979) is the epitome of those vast multistorey interior "atrium" spaces for which Canadian architecture became known internationally in the 1970s." McMordie, Michael. "Eaton Centre." *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, 7 Feb. 2006, [www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/eaton-centre](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/eaton-centre).

<sup>3</sup> Ritchie, Christina. "Introduction." *Evidence of the Avant Garde Since 1957 : Selected Works from the Collection of Art Metropole Including Audiotapes, Records, Videotapes, Film, Multiples, Kitsch, Manuscripts, Stamps, Buttons, Flyers, Posters, Correspondence, Catalogues, Porn, T-Shirts, Postcards, Drawings, Poems, Mailers, Books, Photographs and Ephemera*, Art Metropole, 1984.

<sup>4</sup> "SERIES 7™." *Republic of Fritz Hansen*, [fritzhanzen.com/en/series7](http://fritzhanzen.com/en/series7).

these drawings over in various lights grows. I want also to fold it up, hold it, and leaf through it with a lick of my index finger.

Instead of pursuing the copy of *Evidence of the Avant-Garde* that Sullivan lent to the gallery, I emerge onto Queen St. on Saturday morning, disoriented from the shopping centre lights, and I head north on Yonge. Arriving at the Reference Library implausibly laptopless, paperless, and penless, I place a request to retrieve the publication from the archive—a process I relish in its quiet, clandestine ritual. I'm reminded of the feeling a few days later when a similar choreography delivers my repaired laptop back to me in a protective papery-cloth bag.

At the library, I take some time with the unremarkable materiality of *Evidence of the Avant-Garde* before greedily snapping pictures of every one of its spreads. I'd just finished deleting swathes of pictures and videos from my phone, clearing enough space for it while I waited the twenty minutes I was told it would take to retrieve the book.

Opening the pictures later, I find they are blurred and bathed in shadow in a way that compromises legibility, recalling the strikethroughs of Sullivan's titles along with the incidental pictorial disruptions of the book that they reference. For each drawing, he negates the title of the book, foregrounding other, incidental phenomena appearing in the drawings, such as a "Prism Scatter." It's in this drawing, #135, *Evidence of the Avant-Garde Ex-library, Prism scatter*, 2018, that the second and final page of Christina Ritchie's introduction to *Evidence of the Avant-Garde* is visible, if you crane your neck to the left. On the previous page of Ritchie's address, which I open on my phone and bring to an intelligible scale with a drag of my fingers, she acknowledges the paradoxes embedded in the archive form (presumably both AM's archive writ-large and the more limited archive proposed by the publication). Ritchie writes, "It can be seen as a contradiction in terms: to call something an archive is to impute an authoritative and definitive organization of material and information, and yet the material under discussion was in large part realized in this form in order to bypass the validating and authorizing mechanisms of gallery and museum (and likewise archive)." *Do we contradict ourselves? Very well, then we contradict ourselves* she seems to say. This prior, or more accurately, perpetual, contradiction feels newly pertinent, considering Art Metropole's recent physical move into the Museum. The move was announced just weeks before the opening of Sullivan's show, and it signals a "new operating model" for AM and a "renewed vision for the distribution of artist's books and multiples."<sup>5</sup> It's a shift Sullivan couldn't have consciously known at the outset these new drawings.

At the conclusion of her statement penned in 1984, Ritchie sidesteps the question of whether Modernism and the avant-garde have expired in favour of Postmodernism. Instead, she offers a thought, which, compounded over time, resonates with crystalline clarity: "The jury is still out in this debate but there does seem to be consensus on at least one point. Capitalism and industrial society are undergoing profound changes and the function of the arts in general and the avant-garde in particular must be redefined. This review of the 'evidence', in all its bellicose diversity, can provide the ground for a re-assessment."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> "Announcing - AM x MOCA." *Art Metropole*, Sept. 2018, [artmetropole.com/events/am-x-moca](http://artmetropole.com/events/am-x-moca).

<sup>6</sup> Ritchie, Christina. "Introduction." *Evidence of the Avant Garde Since 1957 : Selected Works from the Collection of Art Metropole Including Audiotapes, Records, Videotapes, Film, Multiples, Kitsch, Manuscripts, Stamps, Buttons, Flyers, Posters, Correspondence, Catalogues, Porn, T-Shirts, Postcards, Drawings, Poems, Mailers, Books, Photographs and Ephemera*, Art Metropole, 1984.