

WHAT I WAS SEEING

Jen Hutton

In 2004, Derek Sullivan produced a limited-edition silkscreen poster that emulated the typical vernacular design you might find on a community bulletin board. With the requisite tear-off tabs listing his actual phone number along the bottom, the work's subtitle and its purpose appears scrawled across the top. *(Untitled) Books Wanted* is a wish list of seminal artist book and catalogue titles long out of print. Alongside The National Gallery's 1975 catalog raisonné of the works of Donald Judd, the list includes titles by Allan Ruppersberg, Martin Kippenberger and Ed Ruscha – all books of a certain vintage and authored by artists that figure elsewhere into this analysis.¹

What is important to note is that *Untitled (Books Wanted)* is an edition of fifty posters, but for *Bookworks*, his solo exhibition at the MacLaren Art Centre, Sullivan borrowed the editioned poster owned by Ed Ruscha himself.

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A book is at once many things. It is a container for information, a distributed object, a prop for a performance and a signifier of status. While some books are completely disposable others are highly coveted objects, as Sullivan's *Books Wanted* poster suggests.² In Sullivan's wide-ranging practice, books are both a source of information as well as an organizing principle or form. And in some regard, a book, as an anthologizing structure or medium for quotation, presents a particular way of connecting some dots, which in Sullivan's hands sets off recursive loops that spin off in multiple directions. Ultimately, what Sullivan suggests with his work on, in and about books is that there's more than one way to read one.

The extra effort to include *that copy of Untitled (Books Wanted)* in this exhibition suggests it leverages more weight than its small-p presence here. In fact, it is noticeably outnumbered: the core of *Bookworks* is a selection from Sullivan's ongoing series of large-scale poster drawings in coloured pencil (2006-present), specifically a more recent set depicting printer's signatures.³

¹ Jen Hutton, "Noble Fuel, or How I Burned Certain of My Books," keynote lecture at the 9th York University Graduate Art History Symposium, March 19, 2010.

² There is no better illustration for the complex supply and demand economics of books than the display aesthetics of a used bookstore: rare, hard-to-find books are generally shelved at the counter, while tattered trade paperbacks and overstock is often found in a box at the door.

³ While the content of Sullivan's poster drawings has changed over the years, what remains consistent in their size (127 x 96.5 cm) and their multivalent systems of references – sometimes about books, sometimes not.

These artifacts of the printing process may be familiar to anyone who has supervised a print run of a book, though it itself is a specialized body of knowledge.

A few definitions, now, to level the field:

A **press sheet** is the full sheet of paper stock fed into a large format printer for high speed offset printing. The **signature** is the particular arrangement of a group of book pages on a press sheet, front and back, so that after the sheet is printed, folded and cut, the pages of the book will appear in the correct order. Setting the placement and direction of these pages on the press sheet is called **imposition** – a spatial reasoning challenge that only an expert printer should tackle.

Modern technology has accelerated book production, but offset printing happens in much the same way it has for the better part of the last century: paper cycles through a series of large machines holding a successive series of rollers and felts. At each stage, text and image is deposited on the paper in a four-color process: **cyan, magenta, yellow and black** – or **CMYK** – or occasionally, with spot colors of specific inks that lie outside of that spectrum. These colors are registered in **color bars** – the rows of CMYK or spot color ink dotting the edges of the sheet. The color bar is the printer's litmus test, an index to the printed image.

In the early stages of a press run, an expert printer will pull proofs off the line, one by one, to ensure the print job is printing correctly. With the naked eye or a small magnifying loupe, the printer looks for imperfections: shifts in color or registration, changes in the density of the ink, or aberrations in the type.⁴

The provenance of Sullivan's signatures is hazy: the cues (color bars, the faint outline of pages, indecipherable captions) are there, though we're not entirely sure if we're looking at excerpts of real books or imagined ones.⁵ Nor do these artifacts have quite the same authority as a bound tome. What they do do is enable a sustained gaze, like the expert printer pausing the blur of paper running through rollers in order to inspect one single sheet. Sullivan's drawings, reproductions of reproductions in his own distinct hand – rows of energetic thatched lines in colored pencil – invite a specific kind of "read" different than the linear, page-by-page, line-by-line format of a book. Here, like an expert printer, Sullivan invites you to look at the signature as a whole: zoom in and out and maybe even read it upside-down or sideways.

⁴ With this in mind, **bookwork**, like other action-oriented nouns such as ironwork, needlework and busywork, connotes both product (a book) and process (making one). In my mind, bookwork is all-encompassing, and incorporates a wide variety of gestures not limited to just printing and binding books, but also conceptualizing, selling, consuming and cataloguing them too. And so, I feel *Bookworks* is an apt title for this presentation of Sullivan's work, alluding to the many forms a book may take and also a made-up production facility where all the above takes place and Sullivan's practice is right at home.

⁵ Some printers offer **gang run printing** – multiple printing jobs arranged on a single press sheet so they can be printed at the same time – as a more economical option for small press runs. "Ganged" might be the operative verb for some of Sullivan's press sheet drawings as the content can seem so disparate, pushing on the belief that what's depicted on those pages were part of the same book in the first place.

In this way, the collisions of meaning and possible tertiary references are more visible when the pages of a book are read all at once and in this imagined imposed sequence. Because for Sullivan, the connections between things are more important than the things themselves. So that perhaps a reproduction of Guy de Cointet's incoherent all-caps prose is no less mysterious as the source of the Mona Lisa's Gioconda smile (see #134, *Enigma Codes*, 2018).⁶ Some of this is just word play: how Sullivan shrewdly foists these enigmas upon us without explanation (see **imposition**) is really just a hallmark of his work (see **signature**). Here each book excerpt appears unfolded and pressed flat, but the book's content folds back on itself in ways that defy any preconceived notion of how things are actually organized in space.

And what interrupts our "read"? In some of Sullivan's drawings, little contaminations appear. In one, a shadow in profile, presumably of the artist, looms over spreads of haphazard stacks of books with orange covers (see #141, *Paper Architecture Press Approval*, 2018)⁷⁸⁹. In others the

⁶ In truth, the work depicted in Sullivan's drawing is not *the* Mona Lisa but rather *Mona Isa*, a collage of an image of the former by contemporary artist Isa Genzken.

⁷What is significant about this drawing is the spreads are near-identical facsimiles of an actual book: *Persistent Huts*, an artist book Sullivan published in 2008. In this book, Sullivan presents black and white photographs of staged architectural models constructed from multiple copies of Martin Kippenberger's *Psychobuildings*, a highly-sought after (and now out of print) artist book published in 1988. The content and concept of Sullivan's book riffs on Kippenberger's, which in itself is comprised of captionless photographs of vernacular architecture, street signage and Kippenberger's sculpture. Likewise, *Persistent Huts* is a nod to Ed Ruscha's 1966 artist book *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, which is also comprised of photographs, arranged end to end on a 25-foot long accordion foldout, documenting the facades on one side of the titular street in Los Angeles. Of note, "Persistent Huts" is merely an anagram of "The Sunset Strip" and further to that, Ruscha's book is one of the coveted books Sullivan seeks in *Untitled (Books Wanted)*. Too, the record of Sullivan's shadow in the frame is not inconceivable. In real life Sullivan has supervised the printing of his own books and of others for previous jobs. But the presence of his shadow here connotes the artist's practice too – a combination of recursive thought processes that loop back to specific objects of inquiry as well as a self-reflexive gaze.

⁸ Sullivan's work is particularly ripe for this writer given we are both hungry bibliophiles and pursue respective research-oriented practices that rely on an almost encyclopedic set of references and codes. The quandary is any attempt to describe his individual works, like the previous footnote, are lengthy, and while these descriptions are elucidating they also seem to stifle the deft wit of Sullivan's investigations. Too, it is a daunting (and minimizing) task to distill the entire body of Sullivan's work in a few short paragraphs. One can best offer a particular point of view: a text assembled from notes, observations, quotations, self-reflections and digressions scribbled into the margins of an exhibition checklist and supported by several quick consultations of the art historical canon and my very own library. This "research" is no different than Sullivan's m.o. – it was what I was seeing too.

⁹ And I confess, if it's not already apparent, that I've long been an admirer of Sullivan's work. Some of the background information presented here stems from multiple conversations with the artist spanning over a decade. This is not necessarily an advantage in interpreting his work. Such analysis and meta-analysis belongs in the footnotes as it's all just a corollary of the primary narrative, to be read in succession or in tandem with the text, or not at all. (Though the decision to elevate any part of an argument from a footnote to a paragraph really depends on what you are trying to say, but perhaps the heart of my argument is better positioned as a digression anyway?) In a way, the current form of the text deliberately upends its purpose as a guide or interpretation or decoder ring to the work on view. But here I endeavor to say it may be more pleasurable to read everything sideways, or look at Sullivan's work without a guide at all.

silhouettes of invasive flora lie over the pages (see **#136, ~~Evidence of the Avant Garde Ex library, Ragweed, 2018~~**, or **#139, ~~Evidence of the Avant Garde Ex library, Giant Hogweed, 2018~~**).¹⁰ And here and elsewhere the scattershot rainbows of prisms refract light into its own natural index of color.¹¹

With its small-p presence, Sullivan's (or Ruscha's) list could be construed as another contamination. "*Untitled (Books Wanted)* is a bit of prank, supposing a low-tech, last-ditch effort to find a gem in the wake of the e-commerce boom dedicated to the rare book market."¹² Sullivan tracked down the poster after spotting it in a small photograph accompanying an article on Ruscha in *Monocle* magazine. In the photograph, the print is in a small, unassuming frame under glass, leaning against the wall in Ruscha's library. This too is a bit of a prank: the irony being not just that Ruscha owns a copy of Sullivan's list but also he probably has the books Sullivan wants and has not called him yet. Its reappearance here is another way of closing a loop.

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¹⁰ And to some, a book is merely a tool to press picked plants flat.

¹¹ See color bars.

¹² Hutton, 2010.