

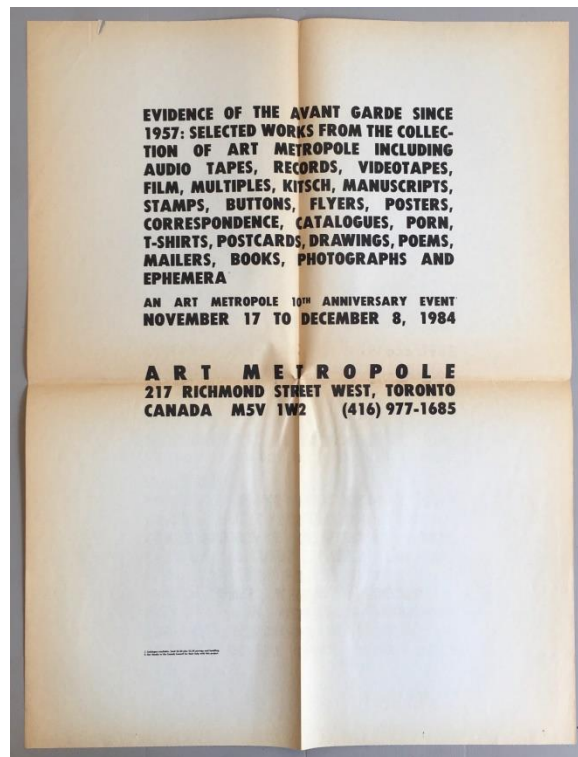
# FrameWork 9/21

## Cason Sharpe on Derek Sullivan

I was the Inventory Manager at Art Metropole for two years, and I still can't describe exactly what the organization is. A gallery, an archive, a bookstore? All of the above and none of it. Here's the official line, the one I'd regurgitate to groups of visiting students: founded in 1974 by General Idea, Art Metropole is an artist-run centre devoted to the documentation, archiving, and distribution of images...<sup>1</sup>

Then I'd watch the students' eyes glaze over.

When I got the job, the organization was in the middle of a move. I learned the inventory by sorting, packing, and relocating it. Have you ever seen eleven thousand pounds of audio tapes, records, videotapes, film, multiples, kitsch, manuscripts, stamps, buttons, flyers, posters, correspondence, catalogues, porn, t-shirts, postcards, drawings, poems, mailers, books, photographs, and ephemera stuffed into a trailer? It's terrifying. The trailer almost fell over, right in the middle of Dufferin. Did I mention that it was raining?



Invitation, 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Exhibition, Art Metropole

<sup>1</sup> "About Art Metropole." *Art Metropole*, 2021. <https://artmetropole.com/about>

I thought about that shaky trailer upon viewing Derek Sullivan's *Evidence of the Avant Garde (ex-library) project*, a collection of six drawings, rendered in coloured pencil, that together reproduce the contents of an Art Metropole catalogue from 1984. Published to commemorate the organization's 10th anniversary, the catalogue and corresponding exhibition showcased a selection of Art Metropole's diffuse archive of distributable art, a category including, but not limited to, audio tapes, records, videotapes, film, multiples, kitsch... Each of the six drawings features eight recreated catalogue pages positioned horizontally in two columns of four, an arrangement recalling a printer's signature. These pieces compose the last half of a series first exhibited in 2018. The first six drawings depicted only one side of the signature; this newly unveiled batch shows us the other.

Sullivan's drawings are an exercise in what the artist calls "slow reading," an experimental process in which he observes and records changes over time. Each reproduced page is marked by the kind of everyday flotsam and jetsam you might find crushed between the pages of any well-travelled book, such as subway tickets, dead flowers, or the occasional wayward pamphlet. In #157, *Evidence of the Avant Garde Ex-library, dandelion and brochures* (2020-21), a list of Art Metropole's audio holdings are rendered indecipherable underneath the tangle of a pressed dandelion, its brown roots and green leaves spiraling in all directions. The archive acquires stains as it passes hands, Sullivan suggests, and those stains, with their power to reveal or obscure, become indistinguishable from the archive itself. In the catalogue's introduction, visible through a jagged rainbow in #152, *Evidence of the Avant Garde Ex-library, Prism scatter* (2020), Christina Ritchie warns us that "the manner in which [Art Metropole]'s archive happened should be born in mind throughout the examination of its contents and it should be acknowledged that its founders, contributors and custodians have been at times disinterested and at other times obsessed with certain phenomena."<sup>2</sup> Greasy fingers stain the page; behind every pressed flower is the hand that plucks.

It's pertinent to mention that my tenure with Art Metropole overlapped almost exactly with the period during which Sullivan produced these drawings, so while he was staining the organization in one way, I was staining it in another. I combed the Art Metropole archive to identify its biases, which had accumulated over the years like a thick layer of dust. Then I put my fist to the dirt and picked a bouquet of the most pleasing flowers available. Did they leave a mark? Have my stains set? As Sullivan's drawings remind me, only time will tell.

<sup>2</sup> Ritchie, Christina. "Introduction." *Evidence of the Avant Garde Since 1957*, Art Metropole, 1984.



*Winter Garden (Window Clings)*, Shannon Garden-Smith, 2019  
Exhibited in Art Metropole's *Something Borrowed, Something New: Gifts By Artists 2019*

Sullivan approaches time from a different angle in *Every day is the same. Every day is different.* (2021). The central reference here is the Formosa perpetual calendar, a wall calendar created in 1963 by the Italian designer Enzo Mari. Straddling the line between functional objects and objects d'art, Mari's modernist oeuvre would be at home among Art Metropole's uncategorizable ephemera. The Formosa calendar is sectioned into quadrants according to month, day of the week, and numerical date, with a set of pvc sheets, marked by months, days, or numbers, that can be added or removed from their corresponding quadrants as time progresses. Using this schema as a compositional departure, Sullivan offers nine drawings, once again rendered in coloured pencil, each one denoting a different day between February 23rd and March 3rd 2021. In the bottom left hand corner of each drawing, Sullivan includes a small photograph of a Formosa calendar set to its assigned date. The drawings then blossom into various formations of interlocking rectangles that recall the Formosa's pvc sheets. Sullivan gives each drawing a unique palette of four to six colours, a visual constraint that blurs the boundary between each individual rectangle to create a variety of unruly new shapes. In *Every day is the same. Every day is different. (February 25, 2021)*, (2021), the interlocking rectangles form a light grey mass intersected by delicate yellow lines and soft blocks of blue and black. In *Every day is the same. Every day is different. (February 26, 2021)*, (2021), the rectangles form a circle of red violently scribbled over orange, yellow, and pink. Two consecutive dates, wrought by opposite feelings. If Mari's modernist calendar presents each day as the same, Sullivan's drawings examine how drastically they can differ.



*Formosa perpetual calendar*, Enzo Mari, 1963

Sullivan drew both *Every day is the same. Every day is different.* and *Evidence of the Avant Garde (ex-library) project* over the past 18 months, a period defined by the global emergence of COVID-19. The contemplative tone of the drawings is unsurprising, given the circumstances. What we've been afforded over the last year and a half, if nothing else, is the opportunity to reflect. In #152, *Evidence of the Avant Garde Ex-library, Prism scatter* (2020), Sullivan conceals the bottom half of the catalogue's cover page with a public health notice concerning the pandemic, a reality nobody could've predicted when he began the project in 2018. I was still working at Art Metropole during the first few months of lockdown. With the organization closed to the public, I sat alone amongst the archive, safeguarding its contents as they went untouched. How did I pass the time during those long, solitary workdays? I did my job. I watched the clock. I slid a greasy finger down the spine of every book. Enzo Mari died from COVID-19 in October 2020, just a few weeks after I officially resigned. He bequeathed his archive to his native Milan, with the oddly specific caveat that it not be shown for 40 years.<sup>3</sup> His wife passed away the following day, leaving no one behind to change the calendar.

<sup>3</sup> Green, Penelope. "Enzo Mari, Industrial Designer Who Kept Things Simple, Dies at 88." The New York Times, October 30 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/30/arts/design/enzo-mari-dead-coronavirus.html>