

## I stack things. I tear stuff up.

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1.

By way of introduction I offer as my own an explanation of my working methods provided by a student attending a lecture I'd just given about my work. "So," he paused before asking his question, "your art is tearing stuff up or stacking things?" I paused myself before replying, "well . . . basically . . . yes." I tear stuff up; always paper, mostly pages. I stack things; mostly books, but sometimes more organic materials. On occasion I cut printed papers up and paste some pieces down. From time to time I stack things up (again, mostly books) in front of a camera and make photographs. In recent years I've sloshed paper pulp around in vats, lifted masses of it up in screens, deposited the wet sheets on tables and festooned them with strands of string or yarn before pressing and drying them. On other occasions I've painted on paper or pages (not, so far, on canvas). Before, during, and after all of this, I've made drawings, or else written words that sometimes can be read as art.



2.

I tear pages. I stack books. On given days these processes, or others that seem similarly inane in summary, occupy me in the studio. I assert that I am an excellent tearer of pages or stacker of books, but what then constitutes my virtuosity? Look at one of my altered books and you can see the torn edges of every sewn or perfect-bound sheet that formerly comprised its text block. My systematic excising of pages leaves a form whose organization in itself challenges the suggestion of random harm within the word, "tear," commonly used to describe what I've done. As for my stacking, it's the ordinary work of aggregation, whose oddness arises from what it is I'm building up with. Books in a row could be on anybody's shelf, but books in a stack raise some interesting questions.

3.

As an art student I acquitted myself well enough in the sculpture, printmaking, and painting studios. I could do a very good job of drawing the elements of a still-life. I enjoyed sketching the figure or a landscape. Indeed, the first ten years of my exhibiting career consisted almost entirely of drawings, although of a more process-oriented kind. In a sense I became the artist I am now through an act intended as a negation. Let me explain: In 1972 I read about the work of Robert Ryman in an essay, by Robert Pincus-Witten, in the June issue of *Artforum*. Looking at the black and white reproductions of Ryman's white paintings, my thoughts ran something like, "This is not art. This is just white paint. It's not even white in these pictures. They're white paintings that look gray in reproduction because halftone images can't ever be completely white." Irritated and fascinated, I decided that if a white painting was art, then a pencil drawing which was

merely shades of gray was also art, and I set to work straightaway. This exercise in shading was easier said than done. Wherever my crosshatching overlapped, a darker band emerged in the graphite, and after many hours of working and reworking the paper, my field of gray was visibly traversed by many horizontal bands. It was beautiful, at least to me, and also a way to understand something of what Ryman was doing with that white paint.

4.

When you tear pages out of books, you accumulate a great many torn pages. Now and then I would make collages out of this material, at first by carefully cutting away the text on one or several pages, but saving the strips of the spaces between lines of type. Since I had cut the words out at what type designers call “x height,” the tops and bottoms of some letters were left behind. The bowl beneath a lowercase “g” made for an especially evocative graphic residue. Little fragments of letters, still almost readable, peppered my otherwise blank *Page* collages, and thinking of my cutting away process as a form of erasure led me to think about erasing images. The exemplary object for such erasure was the postcard. Souvenir *par excellence*, the postcard is writing for from one to another, and putting one into the mail validates both the experience of the place pictured on the front and the bonds of whatever nature joining the sender to the recipient. I make grids of old postcards, whose images I have partly or almost completely sanded away, into arrays of ghost images — windmills, bridges, castles, and flowers are among my assortments — over which I sometimes paint the silhouettes of stacked books.

5.

In In 1999 I was invited to spend a free day in the studio with a Polaroid 20 x 24 camera. One of the small numbers of these special large-format cameras was then on loan to Columbia College Chicago’s photography program, and invitations were being made to artists unfamiliar with the machine and its capabilities. I’d previously used film cameras mainly to document my work, but was familiar with the exceptional physical and chemical attributes of

large format Polaroids from seeing the 1979 installation, at the David and Alfred Smart Gallery (now Museum), of a life-sized Polaroid photographic reproduction of Raphael’s *The Transfiguration of Christ*, from the original oil on wood painting in the Vatican Museum. I decided to make my own version of a transfiguration by photographing all of the books in my library by or about Dieter Roth, whose extraordinary work with artists’ books had greatly influenced my thinking about the book as art. I loaded a cardboard box of Roth books into my car and drove to Chicago. Once in the studio I realized that the accidental arrangement of the books in that carton was at least as visually appropriate to the image I had in mind as any of the sketches I’d made, so the finished work includes that box, upended and still filled with books, plus a few more stacked on top or leaning against its sides. All of the books are placed with spines turned away from the camera. The titles are unreadable, but slightly open pages can be seen here and there.



6.

“So how might things proceed from here; how to stall a sentence so that it lingers over a nothing-in-particular in order to make the duration of its reading stand in for a silence of some sort.”

This sentence, writ large, is the text of *Sentence*, a pencil drawing of mine from 2003. Here’s another, from an ink wash drawing, *Life Sentence*, I made the same year:

“A BRIEF MORNING – THOSE SCREAMS OF RAGE  
OR JOY – THEN THE LONG BECOMING OF BODY  
AND SELF– CONSCIOUSNESS OF POWER AND  
REGRET IN THE WANING DAY– BREATHE IN AND  
OUT.”

7.

Another invitation, in 2002, brought me to papermaking. In January of that year I was invited by the College Art Association to contribute an editioned work to their ongoing series of commissioned artists' prints, benefitting CAA's Professional Development Fellowship Program. The edition was to be produced at the Rutgers Center for Innovative Print and Paper (now the Brodsky Center for Innovative print and Paper) in the Mason Gross School of Art on the Rutgers campus in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Most of my work as an artist has been on, or of, paper, yet I'd never made paper until my visit to the Brodsky Center. My initial impression of the paper studio was of rank, fecund aromas. Anne Q. McKeown, a master papermaker with the MFA from Yale, presided over this area. My first thought was of making a little book with handmade paper pages, but I was enthralled by a small paper piece Anne had made to show me, consisting of strips of abaca fiber and linen over cotton, in which lengths of string had been embedded. Pulling the strings out created torn edges in the paper strips that resembled the torn pages in my altered books. I tugged at one string and then another, enjoying the process but not especially liking the look of the tears. It wasn't until that evening, over dinner at an Ethiopian restaurant, that it occurred to me to use lengths of string to form words in script. But what was there to say? I thought about recycling the last sentence from some writing of mine, "only the text is total," but that line, which so neatly closed my essay, seemed pretentious just by itself. I dropped the vernacular "as if" into the dinner conversation at some point and immediately realized I'd found my phrase: "as" to be torn out from the sheet; "if" to remain as a string capable of being pulled. The next day Anne and I quickly worked out a procedure for making the edition: first a layer of black cotton, then white string spelling out "as," in cursive, then a layer of overbeaten abaca, then a red string cursive "if" (except for the dot over "i," made from pigmented overbeaten linen), and a topmost layer of white

#### ABOUT THE GALLERY

Bruno David Gallery is a contemporary art gallery and one of the most important places to see art in Saint Louis. The Gallery represents some of the best artists that Saint Louis has to offer, along with artists of national and international reputation. The gallery is located in the heart of the Grand Center arts district, directly opposite the Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts and the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis.

overbeaten hemp. I let the ends of the strings emerge from the left margin of the sheet. Once the proofs had dried, I tore the white string away, revealing the sheet's black interior. The red string remained, dangling from the side of the work, inviting viewers to give it a little tug.

8.

Much of my art consists in removal (all those torn pages), occlusion (all the books inside those stacks), or excision



(the rest of the images in those collages of photographic details). What I've taken away from view could be seen as metaphors of forgetfulness, but I am more interested in acts of taking away that are also transmogrifications of the object. I remove such stuff as could make visible the remainder as the armature of a different value.

#### Images:

*Bibliography: Memory Effects*, 2002. Interior dye diffusion print (Polaroid), 31 x 44-1/2 inches (diptych).

*...bursts of memory*, 2003. Handmade paper (abaca over yarn over cotton), 37 x 56 inches. Made at Brodsky Center, New Brunswick, New Jersey.

*Expletive #1 (@#0\*)*, 2008. Linen over yarn on cotton, 40-1/2 x 39-1/2 inches.