

MISTAKE HOUSE

We embrace the moments when creative accidents meet hard work and provide a necessary excuse for rejuvenation. Best enjoyed in the house, with your feet up...



Courtesy of the Principia Archives, Principia College, Elsah, IL

Buzz Spector Interview

By M.H. Staff & Buzz Spector

MH: You work through multiple media—drawing, painting, the sculptural construction of books and pages, collage, and sometimes end your process with photography. For example, your piece *My Fiction* begins with a sculptural process and ends in a photographic one. How does the procession of media filter the ideas you wish to convey? Does this metamorphosis alter concepts or suggest their malleability?

BS: Most art today applies more than single mediums to the task of its making. This is more a question about the role of photography as one of the mediums I use. I'm interested in the way photography replaces the object with its image; in how reading the photograph—both for its *mise en scène* and as a thing in itself—makes a space for us to associate what we know of the books whose titles we can read with what we remember of our own experience of reading some of them. In *My Fiction*, the fact of my ownership of those books is unconfirmed by the composite image. Neither, of course, is my having read any of them. All that's certain there is that I stacked the books. Unlike the actual structure, however, the focal plane of the photographs makes books further back into blurs. I've exhibited *My Fiction* several times over the years and on each occasion the conversations among viewers about the books they see in the work and their own histories of reading comes up against the indecipherability of those stacked books receding into the distance, a distancing into space as well as time.

MH: In works like *Red C/Red Sea*, your acrylic painting of a boat is coupled with a more conceptual presentation of the scattered or stacked post cards. How does painting, with its conventional implications of “originality” and “creativity,” converse with the “cheap and easy” images in postcards?

BS: To be specific, the framed pair of postcards in *Red C/Red Sea* is one component of a work whose other portion is a stack of printed postcards of the same passenger ship on blue and red water. The cards in the frame are identical vintage postcards. I carefully painted the ocean red on one of those cards, while the other is unaltered, except for an “X,” applied by a previous sender of the card, indicating where her stateroom was located on the

cruise she'd taken in that liner. The several thousand postcards I had printed to make this work are both from photographs of the first card—the one without the “X”—before I painted on it. The “red sea” in half of the printed cards was made by switching around the cyan, magenta, and yellow plate assignments of the four color offset press run. The red cards, then, are as “original” as the vintage card I painted because they are not reproducing the appearance of their photographic subject. Instead, they convey the consequence of my intervening in the conventional method of their printing.

MH: In many of your exhibits you display books in unconventional ways, either as scattered parts of a conceptual piece, as in *Malevich (with Eight Red Rectangles)*, or as sculptures, as in *Toward a Theory of Universal Causality*. Could you speak to your fascination with books, both their content and their physicality?

BS: I had the eight oversize books built for use in my *Malevich* installation. Actually there are four sets of books, two of which are now in institutional collections while the other two sets are stored in my studio. The *Malevich* books need to be seen in conjunction with the wall element, whose apertures are in the same spatial configuration as in the 1915 Malevich painting to which my title refers. What's “wrong” about the situation is that the equal depths of the apertures won't accommodate any of the books on the floor, each of which contains a different number of blank pages and, hence, a different depth.

My book stacks are, in sum, a commentary on the lives of books in libraries; on their connection to ideas of archives, vaults, or institutional memory as something distinct from individual recollection. Alberto Manguel refers to the spatial aspect of this in his majestic book, *The Library at Night*, “. . . when the library lamps are lit, the outside world disappears and nothing but the space of books remains in existence.” I usually stack my books on the floor rather than the shelf. Books on floors are unusable for browsing purposes, since only the outermost titles can be read. I have a further ambition to “randomize” all the books of a library—a private one, of course—to demonstrate how little effect on browsing such reconfiguration would have when the volumes are still shelved.

MH: You mention in an interview with James Hyde of the *Journal of Contemporary Art* that your work is meant to be understood “in terms of the excavation or displacement of its objects from their situations.” Could you give an example of a work that operates in this way and then speak to the concepts that result from this displacement?

BS: At the time of that conversation, I thought of my book altering as excavations and my book stacking as displacements. The displacing aspect of my stacks is apparent, but I've come to think of my page tearing as more a graphic exercise than a sculptural operation. A former student of mine, Ted Lowitz, once told me my procedures turned books into more of themselves, and I've stayed happy with the idea that my excising of successive leaves of a book could supplement the symbolism of the resulting artifact to such an extent that my lessening made for more meaning in what's left.

MH: In your 1993 interview with David Pagel, for *BOMB: Artists in Conversation*, you said that you believed that people often take reading more seriously than they do in viewing a piece of art,

because of the shorter amount of time one can spend looking at a piece of art in comparison to reading a book—regardless of its quality. Do you use the forms of books to lampoon the glibness of looking? Or, do you use the forms of books to lampoon the pompousness of reading as a serious pastime? If so, how does this parody operate?

BS: I don't think of my work with books as being parodic. The differences in attention span I point out aren't a means of discrediting books or artworks themselves but rather a way of drawing attention to armatures of absorption we apply to reading much more so than for gazing at art. As I've said in another context, "We dress up and go out to look at art. Undressed, in bed, we read." Pierre Bayard points this out in his *How to Talk About Books You Haven't Read*, "When we talk about books . . . we are talking about our approximate recollections of books . . ." and he goes on to note, "What we take to be the books we have read is . . . an anomalous accumulation of fragments of texts, reworked by our imagination and unrelated to the books of others, even if these [other] books are materially identical to ones we have held in our hands."

MH: Why do you think spending time with art is so difficult for many people? And, do you think reading is taken as seriously in a visual culture as it used to be prior to the internet and digital/media culture?

BS: This arises from the same assumption as in the previous question, that conditions of viewing art are neutral so what's "difficult" must be something within the objects. I sometimes ask audiences at my public lectures to tell me the longest interval of time they have spent looking at an individual artwork. It's a trick question of a sort, coming as it does after my having projected images of my art in installation views or studio set-ups. A typical response would be in the range of five-ten minutes because the assumption is being made that art is something you see in a gallery or museum. So far, nobody responding to my question has included time spent with artworks on their own walls, tables, or floors. When domestic space—that space where most reading takes place—is considered, the differences in timespan between reading and scanning are obviously mitigated.

MH: Do you try to make your work accessible to those who take reading seriously or to those who take looking seriously?

BS: I think accessibility in my work is more a matter of its material and procedural affects than the self-identification of my viewers in relation either to reading or looking.

MH: Books might be called physical containers for ideas. The way you make art, you appear to use the containers to create another container (the artwork) for new idea. Does this layering of container and concept parallel the simple idea of books as layers of text and subtext—as a hidden place that must be mined or explored?

BS: The books I've altered haven't stopped being books. They are as present and available for handling as any other books, except when the institution owning them prevents one from touching. The physicality you refer to is of embodiment beyond shelf life, so to speak. When I touch my beloved, the expression of care is directed toward the inner life of a mind

but the application is of hand to skin. Looking and holding are simultaneous in reading print books, but also in e-readers. Even reading from a desktop screen requires a mouse or keyboard at hand, so some vestige of touching continues to accompany most situations of reading today.

MH: We have to ask, where do you get all your books? Are you a fanatic reader? Do you keep every book you acquire?

BS: My library is being acquired volume by volume. The books I use for installation purposes are borrowed from local sources. At first I kept a material inventory of some 2,000 books in my studio, but I learned over time that public library systems and used bookstores have thousands of discarded books they're very willing to give away for my purposes. I no longer transport any books-as-material to the site of an installation project. There are always plenty of books nearby. I'm really less of a reader now than in years past, in part because I can make use of my history of reading in developing the lecture or discussion courses that comprise at least part of my teaching. My love of fiction and poetry continues unabated, but I more frequently check such books out from the library, buying a copy after one reading if I am particularly moved, or else if the book I'm curious about isn't yet available in my university or community library. I do not keep every book I acquire, and am now thinking about dispersing parts of my library as gifts to special collections libraries or, in the case of certain older rare books, to auction where selling them covers my studio rent. I will never sell a book inscribed to me.

MH: Tearing, cutting, stacking, pasting, arranging and rearranging, inhabiting: all are physical and perhaps spontaneous activities. What is the place of physical action in your work?

BS: We're all acting physically as artists. Even when our art is about ideas someone has to apply the letterforms to the wall. I believe in thinking with my hands as well as my head.

MH: How much planning vs. improvisation happens in your work?

BS: Every artist has a plan; otherwise it's impossible to even start. But the negotiation with one's materials is where one makes a better or lesser work of art. This is the substance of teaching art; helping students to see the difference between their intentions and what they've made.

MH: You sometimes depict yourself within or surrounded by arrangements of your books (and your books sometimes seem to be a stand in for yourself). Can you talk about "inhabiting" an idea and a world of ideas?

BS: As long as I've been constructing book stacks, now more than thirty years, I've been aware of the place I occupy in relation to my books. That is, within them.

MH: The Soap Bubble Set section of *Mistake House* is partly where we wish to connect the student with the professional. Naturally, we have some questions of interest to student artists and writers:

Was there a moment where you felt like your work started to move from the student state to that of the professional?

BS: I can almost pinpoint the date in April 1972. I'd been working on a graphite drawing at home as part of my participation in an advanced drawing studio. It took many hours to complete it according to the protocol I had set for myself. When I brought the drawing to class my instructor immediately asked me if I was interested in trading for it. My confidence in the work I'd made was confirmed by that request. I said "no" to the trade, by the way, and I still have that drawing.

MH: You're a busy man—juggling teaching at Washington University in St. Louis with critical writing and ongoing art projects in multiple media. What advice do you have for the busy about how to maintain a work ethic and a creative practice?

BS: Everybody's busy yet some people get more done in whatever sectioned-off interval of time, than others. Students are all familiar with the imposed deadlines of semester's end and often, after graduating, they think they'll begin treating their studio work as a continuum rather than episodes of one semester in length. This is a mistaken idea that can lead to, in my case, staying home on a New Year's Eve in order to finish a drawing that I could sign and date for the year I graduated so as to say I'd finished at least one artwork in the six months since I'd left school. No, the best way to get stuff done is to keep your calendar going. Mark off studio times for each week or month, and when things come up, remember to block in "replacement" time later.

MH: How do you feel about your earlier works when you compare them to your current works?

BS: What I can say about my concern with this issue is that it has kept my standards high in judging whether any just-completed work of mine has succeeded or failed before I let that work go out to the world.

MH: What do you value most deeply as a teacher?

BS: Teaching artists teach by demeanor as well as demonstration, and assessment of particular studio pedagogy is as much a matter of students recognizing attentiveness on the part of their instructor as it is the learning of art techniques. It is a general characteristic of great teaching that heartfelt enthusiasm for the subject and those who study it is joined to thorough knowledge of the field. There's more to it, though, when studio art is the subject. It is at best a minor pedagogical virtue to teach the making of art in such a manner that the work of one's students mimics one's own. I think about how the traces of the attention paid by a dedicated teacher can subsequently flourish in students' own work, helping them to see what they've made outside of the shadows they themselves cast by their ambitions, their anxieties, or their ideological bent.

MH: Do you ever play hooky (we hope you do)? And, if you do, what is your favorite thing to do when you take off suddenly, as in a *derive*?

BS: How long is “playing hooky”? I take a few minutes off every morning I sip my coffee and work the *New York Times* Crossword puzzle. It used to be said of me, by people I love, that I don’t know how to take vacations. For this question I will propose that a vacation must be the long form of playing hooky. That criticism was true enough when I was still employed in academic administration, but nowadays I am happily (all) there when I am ensconced with family and friends in a cottage by a lake in the Adirondacks, especially when the annual Friends of the Schroon Lake Library summer book sale takes place.