

## Derek Sullivan, On Filling In, Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto

Alex Bowron

Number 89, Winter 2017

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/84332ac>

[See table of contents](#)

---

### Publisher(s)

Les éditions esse

### ISSN

0831-859X (print)

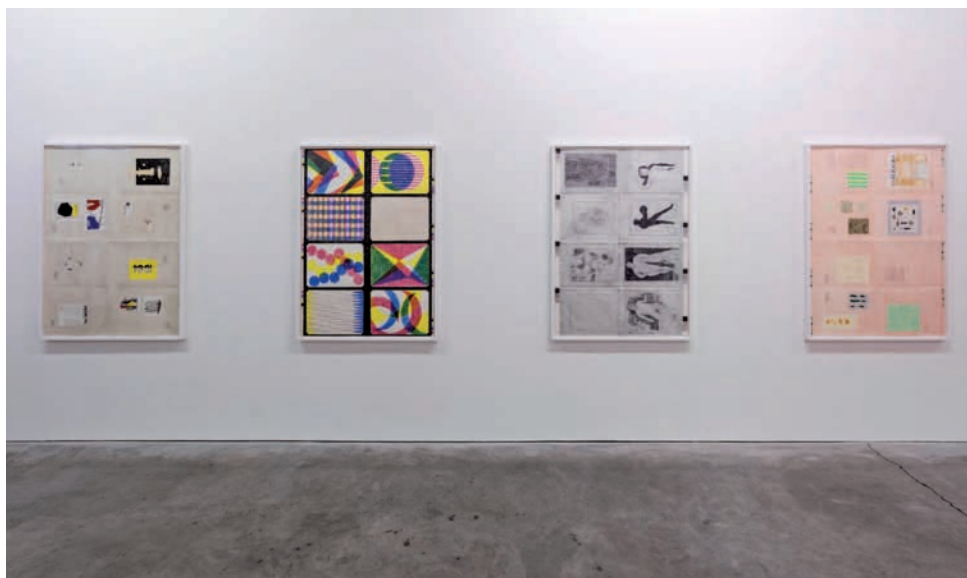
1929-3577 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

### Cite this review

Bowron, A. (2017). Review of [Derek Sullivan, On Filling In, Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto]. *esse arts + opinions*, (89), 86–87.



## Derek Sullivan

### *On Filling In*

*On Filling In* continues Toronto-based Derek Sullivan's investigation into the physical, historical, and conceptual boundaries of the book.

Six framed drawings open the show. They are the newest in an ongoing series of poster-sized coloured pencil on paper works that deal with the nature of representation, mark-making, and a personal relationship to the passage of time. Appearing at first as unrelated compositions, the content of these methodically scratchy, repeated tessellations is actually a conglomeration of illustrated ephemera, text, and experience from a recent summer sojourn in Paris, France. With a predilection for books as repositories for superlative learning, Sullivan has made a practice out of questioning what a book is, and what it could be. These most recent drawings, all divided into eight-part grids and ringed by colour bars, emulate the signature, or press sheet, of a book as it appears before being proofed for printing. These pages are the flesh of a book—abstractions with a whiff of familiarity—forming unlikely juxtapositions out of literary content in its pre-linear state. By presenting each page as a complete work, he is suggesting an ontological instability to the book object, one where its physical state is not necessarily equal to its conceptual backing. The emphasis here is on the ambiguity and plurality of meaning as prefaced by postmodern, post-author, and poststructuralist theory. Sullivan is laying out the framework for a series of books that will never be.

As if to distill this thinking to its purest possible form, Sullivan has created *Volumes*, a work constructed by packing every book from the gallery's library into an orderly stack of uniform cardboard boxes. This clever and deceptively simple gesture rejects the fixed meaning and traditional authority of the book. With the potential to convey the perceived intelligence, achievements, and social networks of its owner, a bookshelf is a form of self-portraiture. In *Volumes*,

the character and jurisdiction of the gallery director is disrupted through an act of displacement and a covering up of her books. In their new state, the physical weight of these books is emphasized, while their figurative significance is entirely negated. This intervention is only made more effective by the anxiety produced by the proximity of the empty shelves. The paradoxical equality between what is included and what is missing is both embodied and emboldened by this simple act.

Returning to a more optimistic notion of emptiness, Sullivan has constructed *TK*, a black accordion of four empty book covers that delineate what is yet to come. Meant to be sold as is, this empty vessel epitomizes the very essence and romance of the book. Over the course of one year, Sullivan has promised to send each buyer one artwork per week, custom made to fit inside its case. With complete commitment to the malleability of meaning, this speculative artist book will exist in its entirety at each moment that its content is born. Exhibiting a characteristically astute generosity, Sullivan asks for a leap of faith right at the moment that he is taking one, a gesture that gives us every reason to enjoy the book for what it isn't.

Alex Bowron

**Susan Hobbs Gallery**, Toronto,  
October 20–November 26, 2016

#### Derek Sullivan

← *On Filling In*, exhibition view,  
Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto, 2016.

Photo : Toni Hafkenscheid, courtesy of  
Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto

↑ *Volumes*, 2016.

Photo : Toni Hafkenscheid, courtesy of  
Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto

→ #114, some treatments  
and arrangements, 2016.

Photo : Toni Hafkenscheid, courtesy of  
Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto

