

## Interview with David Crawford by Helen Thorington

Helen Thorington: Let's start with some "how you do it" questions about Stop Motion Studies (SMS). As I understand your process, you choose a city, analyze the city's train lines, take pictures on the train using a digital camera—the PowerShot A40—and then edit them in an animated sequence.

How many pictures do you take?

David Crawford: Rough estimates are:

SMS 6 - New York (3,000 images)  
SMS 5 - New York (3,000 images)  
SMS 4 - Boston (6,000 images)  
SMS 3 - Paris (12,000 images)  
SMS 2 - London (3,000 images)  
SMS 1 - Göteborg (12,000 images)

HT: Many of the people you photograph seem not to notice that you're photographing them. How long do you spend photographing each of your subjects?

DC: Anywhere from 5 seconds to 5 minutes. People's body language largely determines how long I'll photograph them. While I've tried asking if I can take pictures, the results of this process haven't been as strong as when I just start shooting. The optimal scenario is one where people are aware that they're being photographed but are either ambivalent about it or react to it as a form of play. While I'm willing to take calculated risks, I'm not looking to make people furious. I heard that Harmony Korine (director of "Julian Donkey Boy") had a video project in which he intentionally tried to make people furious and was sometimes attacked. When I heard this, it suddenly reminded me of an encounter I had in the East Village a few years ago: two men with a video camera stopped me on the street and said something to the effect of "Hi, can we talk?" I simply kept walking—to which one of them said "It's OK if you get upset!"

HT: How do you proceed with the photographs?

DC: Once the photographs are transferred to hard disk I begin sorting and editing them by date. My main method is a process of elimination based upon the resonance of each clip—in other words, how long a sequence holds my interest. I usually end up with two to three times the number of sequences I'm after (20) and seem to often consider making more than one series per city. However, the longer I spend with the material, the more a handful of sequences start to stand out. The New York work was the first time the "signal to noise" ratio was such that I actually had enough material for two editions (SMS 5 & 6).

HT: Why do you choose 20 for each series?

DC: Before editing the first series, I had the sense that I wanted to work with a predetermined interface. While the reinvention of interface is a fascinating enterprise, it can easily subsume other aspects of a work. I wanted to minimize the potential of this happening and instead opted for an all-purpose interface that I could design once and then iterate within. 20 is simply the number that made the most sense in terms of the visual design.

HT: Is there a special reason why you chose the subway (Metro/ Underground) as the public "stage" for your work?

DC: For a dollar or two, anyone can ride the subway. In a city like New York, you'll get some really wild juxtapositions of characters which can be both heartwarming and disconcerting. Ultimately, however, this experience has always reaffirmed my belief in society. Also, there's a parallel between the subway and the Web. While far from utopian, both networks are inclusive in spirit and represent two of the most dynamic vestiges of public space we have. They are also full of "grey areas" when it comes to distinctions between public and private.

HT: There are times when you do seem to be intruding on private space; at other times the photographs seem to come out of a momentary relationship between you and the photographed and that seems more like collusion than intrusion...

DC: You could frame it as such. A person's relationship to the camera is pretty heady stuff. While there are currently numerous debates stemming from heightened surveillance, my interest is mainly in the psychological dimensions involved in the act of making an image of someone.

HT: Let's talk about the Studies as a project for the net. From the beginning net art has been pretty self-referential, referring to the computer, the World Wide Web, or in some cases, the technology available for working on the Web. In using images from the "real world" and focusing on small but expressive human movements, gestures, expressions of emotion, do you feel that the Stop Motion Studies are doing something more? Creating some kind of fusion of net concerns and real world representation?

DC: In as much as: the subway is a network, and people's movements are procedural (based on programming rules)—digital technology and the net are intrinsically part of the content. On a more personal level it's been great to get away from the computer and re-enter the world, so to speak. Also, I've always enjoyed the two-stage process of shooting and editing.

HT: I agree with those who say that narrative has been "buried under and marginalized by the sheer mass of spreadsheets, databases and GIS" (Sean Cubitt, *New Screen Media*, p. 11). And that if it is to return, it can no longer afford to be "whole," "complete." Do you think of the Stop Motion Studies as reintroducing aspects of narrative, as sparking a narrative sense in the "new media?"

DC: Since we're hard wired for narrative, it doesn't take much for something to be read in this manner. I noticed in a conversation last night that when two friends made different points at exactly the same moment I could not help but pay attention to the one who started his statement by saying: "There are four things to consider." A simple narrative gesture can wield enormous power. If one looks at the narrative/database dichotomy from a decent vantage point it becomes clear that taken as a cultural whole narrative is anything but marginalized. An example would be the religious fundamentalism responsible for so much of the violence in the world. This is pure narrative.

Regarding the potential impossibility of holistic narrative in new media, I would say that a multiform plot can afford to be "complete," but that the structure of the data and our means of accessing it will likely be "procedural, participatory, spatial and encyclopedic" (Janet Murray, "Hamlet on the Holodeck"). In this book Murray draws interesting parallels between the storytelling processes of the oral bards and the innate properties of digital environments. The irony that this suggests is that while a multiform plot may be "whole" in actuality, we may only be able to see aspects or instantiations of it. The place where this is going to happen is obviously in the gaming industry. I recently read that to have a user be so moved that they "burst into tears" is considered to be the Holy Grail by the president of the firm developing "The Matrix Reloaded" game

that is said to have been written by the Warshawski brothers, the film's directors.

HT: Apropos of feeling, I think it would be really interesting if we could relate the Stop Motion Studies, which do evoke an emotional response, to your earlier work. "Substitute," which I think followed "Charming One Bedroom," seems to me to be an indictment of the database driven world: it is so devoid of the richness and complexity one hopes for in life. But just because the life story it tells is so wanting in "narrative content," it elicits compassion from its user. Did you structure for this outcome?

DC: Formally, the work was born out of a fascination with the interface convention of "pull-down" menus. To the best of my knowledge, this GUI component was invented by the Lisa group at Apple (<http://www.cs.stir.ac.uk/~sjr/>) in the early 1980's. In any case, I'm always amazed by how elegant and efficient this invention is in terms of interaction design. As far as content, "Substitute" was an experiment in making a character sketch using database logic.

HT: So, how do you see the relationship between the Stop Motion Studies and this earlier work?

DC: I adamantly resisted using bitmaps for a long time and finally just gave over to them in the SMS project. As I mentioned above, it's been important to me to approach the net on its own terms and while I've flirted with varying shades of purism in this regard (dynamic data to minimal file sizes) I've always had a strong cinematic impulse. I think part of the reason the new work has been so compelling to make is that I don't feel like I'm pulling punches anymore.

HT: Do you think of these studies as "movies" or "animated stills"—and is there a difference?

DC: I think of them as sequences or clips, so I suppose that means "movies" or more specifically "video." We tend to think of stills as being the building blocks of motion pictures and in that way as being less complex. In my opinion, photographs are actually more complicated in that they arrest time in such an unnatural way.

HT: What's the difference between capturing a gesture and capturing motion?

DC: One can think of body language as a set of geometric data points. If you see a person with whom you are familiar approaching from a hundred yards — you can often still recognize them by their outline. Likewise, if you take a photo of a person and examine their body language, you can often infer a significant amount of emotional information. Matisse said that he didn't paint things, but the differences between things. The stills in the SMS project are unimportant—it's the differences between them which matter. Honing in on just a handful of frames amplifies this data, where conventional video tends to bury this information/IT.

HT: Before you got to the Stop Motion Studies, you did two other pieces: "I Am Not an Animal" and "Dance to the Radio." Do you see a difference in your use of narrative between them and the Stop Motion Studies?

DC: These algorithmically generated videos were the bridge which led to the Stop Motion Studies. When I first started working them, I decided to use only 100 images per video in order to minimize file size—despite being concerned that this might not be enough variation to save the montage from being flat. One day I decided to try the piece with 75 images and to my surprise, not only did the file size shrink, but the montage became stronger as well. Next I tried 50 images and again the same results—smaller file size and stronger montage. Finally, I noticed something unique in the first video of the "Dance

to the Radio" series. This video includes a handful of images of a man and woman working together. When any two of these images appear in the montage next to each other there is an increase in narrativity because of the density of information in their body language. Before long I was taking pictures on the subway.

HT: SMS lends itself to becoming almost a sociological study. It's hard to resist making comparisons between "types" on the New York vs. the Paris transit systems, for instance. Do you feel at all compelled to select images from each series and make something new with them, such as a comparative study—or a study of a certain kind of gesture?

DC: "SMS - Series 7" launched a few days ago at the Whitney's Artport (<http://artport.whitney.org>) addresses just this issue. The interface supports four cities on the screen simultaneously while pull-down menus give users access to 100 clips organized by category. It's been an exciting departure from the existing interface and has begun to address the issue of meta-structure—something which I'd like to continue to explore.

HT: Your work has been extremely popular, meaning, there seems to be a very broad spectrum of interest—from the art world to the "populace." How do you feel about this? Who is your intended audience?

DC: While I've gotten crucial feedback from key members of the net art community (yourself included), much of the feedback has come from people who I can only assume are on the periphery of the art world.

HT: Can you give me an example?

DC: Here is a thread archived at MetaFilter, dating from January 24 to January 25, 2003 (<http://www.metafilter.com/comments.mefi/23045>). Also, below is an excerpt from a deceptively simple e-mail I received on December 30, 2002.

Jason writes: *"Your imagination fills in what it wants. If you knew the real person, that perfect vision would be wiped away pretty fast. It makes you think about what feelings are real and what is not."*

HT: Maybe my final question to you should be: what next?

DC: Tokyo.

**03.07.03**

[to interviews](#)

[to David's studio](#)

[to turbulence](#)