

Opening Remarks by Helen Thorington

David Crawford Retrospective

Pace Digital Gallery

2010

I apologize to those of you who may have come to hear Christiane Paul speak. I am not Christiane Paul. However, it's probably not inappropriate that I take her place. I knew David. I met him in the '90s, not long after turbulence.org was founded, and we stayed in touch up until the time - his doctorate nearly complete --he prepared to return from Sweden to the U.S. We were friends, albeit casual friends. The David I knew was a kind and a thoughtful man, -- a very thought-full man.

What I would like to do is talk briefly about a part of David's work that is not really dealt with in our official curatorial statement. And that is about David's instinctive feeling for narrative. David believed, as I think many of us do, that we humans are "hard wired" for narrative.

And he was prescient in his understanding that the changes information overload and the swift pace of our daily lives were bringing would desensitize us to our emotional landscape and thus to a valued component of narrative.

Substitute (<http://www.turbulence.org/studios/crawford/sub/>)

-- a 2000 work -- was an experiment with database logic. Formally, the work was born out of a fascination with the interface convention of 'pull-down' menus. But with regard to its content—and this comes directly from an early interview I did with him -- it was an experiment in making a character sketch using database logic.

The story -- or character sketch, if you will -- then is David's and it's not David's. It's an experiment in which he makes use of database logic, drawing on five categories of information 1) his employer 2) his girlfriend 3) his hometown 4) school and 5) father or stepfather to create a character sketch of his life over a 30 year period.

It 's an emotionless work -- and yet, as I recall, on first seeing it, it elicited from me a painful, "oh my god, what a sad and empty life!" ... not David's life, which had its sadness but was far from empty, but his life constructed with database logic and made visible to us. A reminder, if you will, that the path we were following, while full of information -- overloaded with information -- would often be nearly devoid of emotional content.

Looked at in this way *Substitute* fits into the discussion going on at that time in which narrative and database were pitted against one another and held, by Lev Manovich in any event, to be natural enemies, competing "for the same territory of human culture..." and claiming "an exclusive right to make meaning out of the world." (Manovitch 225)

David did not agree with this opposition

Substitute was an experiment – A step along a path that would lead David to the use of a language more akin to the artist and person he was – body language – photographic body language. A language which he thought of 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 him by his 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... (Interview with David Crawford – 3/7/03. <http://www.turbulence.org/interviews/crawford.html>)

And the emotional content it carries.

David's Stop Motion Studies, then, reintroduced into the mix a way in which emotional content could be experienced. They are studies rich in individual narrative content : small but expressive human movements, gestures, expressions, dense in the human emotion they express – the stories they tell.

There's a great deal more, no doubt, that should be said, that needs to be said about the Stop Motion Studies and the other experiments David undertook during his all too short life. But as I'm not an academic, I'll bow out here, and simply ask those of you who are interested to think of the man and his work and how his work carried at its heart, a real interest in thwarting the numbness of human emotions – and simultaneously showing that narrative is anything but marginalized...

... A simple narrative gesture [David said] 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.

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