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DAVID CROSS' CONFOUNDING HYBRIDITY

MARTIN PATRICK

Artist David Cross' projects have an exacting, merciless feel, yet they incorporate a particular aesthetic abundance, as if attempting to bring together an amalgam of art and cultural references and get them to explode into a panoply of manifold sensory phenomena. Artworks foisted upon the viewer, not strictly at their own expense, but as a generous admission of how much we enjoy confronting our funhouse fears and maddening nightmares. Much can be elicited from this act of confounding hybridity. As with any act of creative synthesis, I could, as a diligent professional art critic and historian, enact a dissection of its components (which I will likely still endeavour to do). But, whether verging on cliché or not, it's important to note that Cross' practice amounts to more than the mere sum of its constituent elements. Many factors enter into the mix that can't easily be discretely enumerated and archived: radical shifts in tone, associations between gestures, the sheer amount of unpredictable variables that run through so many of the pieces. As the artist himself has stated: 'the value of performance art is that it is a medium of the moment, a mode of practice that is contingent, genuinely interactive, and often visceral.'¹

Historically speaking, Cross' early art practice emerged from the crucible of late 20th Century Postmodernism, an era known for its wilful disunity, also characterised by the Poststructuralist tangles ensuing from Anglophonic appropriation of the European relativism of Derrida, et al. And in the wake of a potential downturn in the influence of 'Theory' writ large in contemporary art practice, a central problematic ensues: how to make art that's theoretically astute and informed, but not programmatic, dry as dust, so as to avoid an overly academicised pursuit more akin to the pedantic footnote than the visionary big picture. As a trained art historian, perhaps this quandary would seem even more urgent for Cross. But what's become especially significant and compelling about Cross' practice is the way

in which it both acknowledges past watershed moments of performance and body art, minimalism, and (neo-) conceptualism and sheds its direct debt, a recognition of tradition counterbalanced by a sense of contemporary experimentation; that there are now manifold ways to attack historical problems, and that perhaps they are not entirely historical, but still pressing and urgent, always already with us.

So much art is *unfunny*, and perhaps this serves too often as a default guarantor of its being considered 'consequential'. Cross' work however rarely begins without an ample dose of humour, although such humour might encompass obscure in-jokes, choice verbal play (Cross is an insightful art writer also), perverse re-arrangements and re-segmenting of realities. Cross' humour could be read as rather generation-shaped if not entirely generation-specific. Douglas Coupland's once infamous 'Generation X' being the one I am citing here, or Richard Linklater's cinematic 'Slackers', redolent of certain ironic, bemused modes of viewing one's surrounding context. (A member of this same dispersed generational clan myself, I harbour tremendous affinity with this worldview, such as it is.) But also there is in Cross' practice an inclination towards empathically investigating our intersubjective relations, however mediated and choreographed, while still keeping intellectual queries open but informed, in some ways recalling the movement of the late novelist David Foster Wallace into increasing sincerity and directness in his prose after an intense period of convoluted Postmodernist mind games.

Moreover, some awfully complex, and ultimately conflicted ideas of fun (and 'funny') and games are operating herein. How pleasurable is it exactly to be precariously balanced on some intentionally unstable architectonic devices? Especially to the degree that said devices radically diminish manifest assertions of control on the part of the viewer/participant? *I have to give myself over to these works*. Cross' artworks have a tendency of creating a state of encounter that could potentially seem disempowering, enervating even. The artist has spoken of his works as involving 'destabilising conditions', and this acts as a pointed pun as well, in that the actual material

conditions of Cross' installations can be destabilising as much as the affective dimensions and capacities of the work. Cross has a strong interest in evoking liminal states, in-between, ambiguous, polyvalent, disorientating. Some tricky intersections occur: nervous anxiety meeting hedonistic euphoria, dreamlike reverie juxtaposed with edgy abandon.

I have experienced these artworks in a number of ways, sometimes in full-on participatory mode (*Lean* (2010), *Pump* (2009)), at other times vicariously through the eloquent descriptions of fellow critics, via moving or still images, or within the narratives carefully woven by the artist himself, and the accounts of participants. It is indeed something to watch the actions undertaken by visitors to Cross' work, with a unique quotient of the unexpected manifest as: uncertainty, pleasure, and curiosity intermingling. Cross' practice explores the intricacies of framing and negotiating transitions and contingencies, never wholly stable, always encompassing risk. If play has functioned as a consistent theme throughout Cross' work, he significantly explores play as labour, work, and ordeal. In his projects, participants are contracted into the schema which unfolds, which in turn usually involves contact with the sculptural installation, the site in which it is located, and with the bodies of others, at times that of the artist. This engagement is driven by examining aspects of the haptic, the contextual, and with live performance mediated through video, photography, and installation.

The artist in early performance and video installations examined the assorted modalities and impacts of the gaze often directly confronting participants in unswerving acts of engagement. Works such as *Tear* (2000) or *Viscous* (1999) highlighted the often painful affects of scrutinizing the body in ways that could be seen as abject. The eyes of the artist which could only be seen through small holes atop his red domed installation *Bounce* (2006) recalled the threatening masquerade used in such movies as the *Halloween*, *Friday the 13th*, and *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* franchises, although it was actually Cross, lying prone inside while enacting an endurance performance who was vulnerable to the movements of the participants scrambling

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onto the sculpture. More recently, this interrogation of thescopic has shifted from close consideration of the gaze towards the embodied, performative, participatory features of the work although the provisionality of vision as a means of knowledge is still central to his practice.

Cross' inflatable installations are characterised by their bold visual identity that simultaneously camouflages the complicated scenarios of interrelation, negotiation, and fear that can ensue around, on, and within their confines. Ideas of play, trust, the unexpected coexist and overlap in unequal parts of a novel performative equation. This often occurs in the staging of the more overtly competitive, sporting-style games that Cross has been configuring such as *Level Playing Field* (2013) and *Skyball* (2014). But there are clear and major differences to be discerned between 'real' sports and Cross' idiosyncratic artworks, as the artist has pointed out: 'While sport is, to varying degrees, focused on alignment of physical and mental co-ordination, it is also about beating your opponents, running faster than them, hitting more aces and cross-court winners,' as he describes it in his conversation with Cameron Bishop. 'I am, he suggests, interested in constructing scenarios that frustrate and block pure athleticism tempering physical engagement with cognitive barriers. By limiting vision, making a surface slippery, or accentuating the potential for phobias to be brought to the fore, the works neuter the performance of a pure athleticism.'²

Such performative contexts can be read as echoing literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's description of the significance of the 'carnavalesque' in the Medieval era: 'The hierarchical background and the extreme corporative and caste divisions of the medieval social order were exceptionally strong. Therefore such free, familiar contacts were deeply felt and formed an essential element of the carnival spirit. People were, so to speak, reborn for new, purely human relations. These truly human relations were not only a fruit of imagination or abstract thought; they were experienced. The utopian ideal and the realistic merged in this carnival experience, unique of its kind.'³

One could argue that Cross' projects in their democratising and diminishing of entrenched cultural and social categorisations evoke a similar notion of the carnivalesque, particularly when set against the increasing inequality and polarisation of the contemporary social sphere.

Cross' variegated practice draws upon references across a wide range of the visual culture continuum: minimal, performance, and pop art alongside direct and indirect references to horror films, children's amusements, sporting events, and the occasional nod to sex toys. The projects involve intensely tactile, luridly spectacular means, the bright colouration of amusement park attractions coinciding with atmospheres of potential peril and unease. The works often revolve around building a taxonomic array of gestural actions and movements: to climb, to slide, to pull, to fall, to lean, to jump, to hold, to balance. Cross' own presence as an actual and 'imperfect' body functions as a sort of anchor to the more fantastical aspects of his early projects.

If we do play the art history game, and put some precedents and affinities on the table, they are an eccentric and diverse lot, and among the names that occur to me are Franz Erhard Walther, Paul Thek, Bruce Nauman, Cindy Sherman, Dan Graham, Mike Parr, Paul McCarthy, Robert Morris and Yayoi Kusama. I recall Morris' concise statement in his 'Notes on Sculpture: Simplicity of shape does not necessarily equate with simplicity of experience.'⁴ And in a different vein, McCarthy's comment on Disney: 'It's the invention of a world. A Shangri-La that is directly connected to a political agenda, a type of prison that you are seduced into visiting.'⁵ Or Nauman's statement on his own approach: 'Some of the pieces have to do with setting up a situation and then not completing it; or in taking away a little of the information so that somebody can only go so far, and then can't go any farther. It attempts to set up a kind of tension situation.'⁶ Cross was especially affected by seeing the 1994 Nauman retrospective at Washington DC's Hirschhorn Museum. Here he observed Nauman's ability to knit an assortment of spectacular modes with equally acute yet painful meditations on human experience.

Somewhat surprisingly, the artist also cites the late abstract painter Ellsworth Kelly as a major influence via his engaging monochromatic abstractions. Kelly's rich visual syntax composed of deceptively simple, adjacent forms made a huge impact on the artist, as evidenced in his inflatable structures.

In Cross' *Hold* (2007) an enormous architectural maze designed for a solo performer and an individual audience member, participants climbed one at a time into the inflatable indigo structure needing to hold — and have confidence in — the always unseen performer's hand that appeared through a slit in the wall to guide them each across a high, narrow ledge to the exit on the other side. This, in turn, rather than being a group, athletic-style experience became paradoxically a very intimate investigation of the artist/viewer interrelationship, within a mammoth construction. While Cross' physical presence was once highly integral to — and indeed integrated within — such works, he has steadily begun to involve himself as a more choreographic, directorial presence. I would note that this might be related to his curatorial endeavours which have been significant to his creative identity in terms of thinking through and engaging with, on differing levels, projects that are site responsive and public in their orientation though he himself blames his less agile and resilient body.

Although Cross in many works has questioned the assumptions around both beauty and the grotesque in a very performative and individuated manner, redolent with his own wit, whimsy, and specific approach to materiality, more recently he has cast his view more towards the social body and its corresponding codes of conduct. Cross has spent years actively interrogating and problematising the relations between the so-called beautiful and the grotesque, and has acutely cited Baudelaire's aphorism: 'The beautiful is always strange'. Particularly framed through notions of difference and otherness, Cross' practice examines how our embodied subjectivities are nonetheless never fixed, singular, or continuous. Sometimes this takes

the form of a work that requires a reciprocal participation, and close contact as in *Pump* (2009), in which a smaller inflatable (that could intentionally be transported in a suitcase) allows the two performer/participants to insert their heads into openings that face one another, and control the structure via two footpumps. This exchange is non-verbal, and potentially strenuous and awkward, calling attention to each other's embodied participation and physical cues, becoming temporarily a quasi-unified being.

What Cross has in the past referred to as creating a 'Hansel and Gretel' effect with his sculptural architectural forms, a 'house of allure' is equally crucial to the understanding of a practice that recalls and reconfigures childhood fears and attractions simultaneously. The resulting effect upon the viewer often results in something far richer than one's average theme park ride, more unsettling in implications relating to perimeters, exteriority and interiority in flux, at times becoming evident as different spaces, at other times Cross' inflatable installations and scenarios summon a kind of fantasyland again evoking childhood daydreams (or sometimes, nightmares). Notions of ambiguity, horror, and the grotesque are left in eerie suspension in many of Cross' works, without any direct release of anxiety as in the resolution of standard escapist entertainment. Contrary to such formulas, Cross' practice ultimately develops its resonance through its more nuanced consideration of embodiment, experience, and immersion.

In speaking from the outset of a 'confounding hybridity', I have attempted to sketchily frame but not absolutely contain Cross' practice in its capacity to challenge our normative assumptions regarding self, identity, and the performance thereof. If cultural notions regarding beauty and ugliness are questioned and disrupted, a key strand of Cross' creative research, new questions have an opportunity to emerge that stretch our settled ideas, incorporating rather than disregarding difference. Similarly, this occurs in addressing notions of audience/participant, artist/author, conceptual/visual. By thoughtfully crafting works that intermix and entwine performance, installation,

and sculpture, Cross provokes us both seductively and uneasily. Our human associations constantly pressured by sensations that ultimately are not readily identifiable, comfortable, or safe.

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