

Interview with Dewey Crumpler by Carlos Villa  
Via Interview, San Francisco, Ca Summer 2005

People present in interview:

**CV:** Carlos Villa

**DC:** Dewey Crumpler

**CM:** Charlie Marks

**CV:** Re-Historicizing the Time Around Abstract Expressionism.

**DC:** My name is Dewey Crumpler.

**CV:** I was wondering, how long have you been working as an artist, Dewey?

**DC:** Actually, since I was about 14 years old, and I began working seriously working with making murals and stuff and then I became really a professional artist, in '72, after graduating from here [the San Francisco Art Institute].

**CV:** When and where did you see your first Abstract Expressionist work?

**DC:** When I was in high school I saw my first [Mark] Rothko actually.

**CV:** What about other abstract expressionists that you have seen recently? What other artists since then have you really looked at and really studied and contemplated over?

**DC:** Well you know recently I haven't been looking at abstract expressionist artists specifically because I've never not been really deeply engaged in looking at and following the philosophies and also the kind of work that was generated through that period of American history so Abstract Expressionism has always been an important idea and concept in my own mind in American art history.

**CV:** What works inspire you what abstract expressionist works inspire you? You can also talk about other works too but basically Abstract Expressionism the work.

**DC:** Probably the work of [Willem] de Kooning and [Jackson] Pollock to a great degree. Those are the kinds of standards in Abstract Expressionism that everybody sort of relates to and I was also very interested in the work of artists who worked at that same period but are not well known people like Buford Delaney and Norman Lewis who were also abstract expressionists. Those are artists who were generating a dialogue with materials that I thought were really quite profound and inspirational.

**CV:** How so?

**DC:** Pollock, in terms of his sort of melding ways of looking at ancient practices of making, like, for example, Native American Navajo sand paintings you know the whole idea of pouring of taking sand and pouring it onto a surface and having that surface transformed by the element in terms of its cosmic relationship, the Native American

creating that blazon form of transmutation on the ground through sand and earth is one kind of cosmic context. Pollock sort of manipulating the liquid element of that process, permitting gravity to sort of create this sort of horizontal physical context is another kind of cosmic situation that is the relationship with gravity and the relationship of expression as it falls through the sky and then ultimately makes its way onto the visual surface. Those were profound for me acts of sort of ancient ways of looking at reconstituting physical material.

**CV:** you mentioned de Kooning and I know that you are a drawer and de Kooning was a drawer and also de Kooning could never really get away from the idea of figuration but at the same time he found a way to do something but what was it in that or was in that that you really liked de Kooning?

**DC:** Well I like de Kooning a great deal as a colorist and as a mark maker in the Japanese mark making sense. That is, the Japanese way of calligraphic line—the spontaneity that comes immediately through the body and then into the thing. In terms of figuration, I do not feel that these artists ever stepped away from figuration. Whether it was Pollock or de Kooning, they were deeply figural. But if you think of figural only in retinal terms—that is, that you see something that visually appears to look like a figure—then you miss the point of figuration. Figuration is physical. It is attitude. The whole use of the figure to create the calligraphic context is figural. But we, in our limited capacity in this culture to fix something in a visual recognition, create this unfortunate relationship to Pollock’s trying to obliterate the notion as abstract expressionist was of subject matter they are just idiots from my point of view.

**CV:** How does the knowledge of these tenets of Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism affect your art and what you do?

**DC:** well there is in that context an acceptance a deep acceptance for your initial reasoned act action that you can trust your reasoned action. That is, that you know generally where you want to go in the thing but you are willing to let it happen. In the instant that you capture it, create a cognitive relationship to it and then act and be willing to go with the act. That is something that Abstract Expressionism gave to the 20th century artist, which, I think, is operative in our way of using language, the language of mark making and also the language of physicality—of how we feel when we do something.

**CV:** I am going to ask you something for the future next. What do these theories of abstract expression and your practice have for currently practicing artists for this and succeeding generations?

**DC:** Abstract Expressionism has given us a way of looking at action and making, which opens up the dialog on the field of making in a particular way. It does not lock one in art. Historically, it did not lock one into a certain way of leading a thing. I think young people—people in the present moment—do use this way of making, even though they are working what we call figuratively, in a kind of continuous way. That is, they are making

cartoon reference art or pink bunny art. but the pink bunny art, or the irony that they are wallowing in presently, also has a justice in that kind of open spirit about engagement about deeper probing of something. Only at that time it came out of a kind of existentialist notion and at this time it comes out of a particular kind of cynicism or particular kind of a formula which tries to disassociate or become less passionate about a particular thing to not be too engaged in its deeper meaning it can accept a kind of surface context in a way that the previous generation would just not have permitted you know it required a much deeper engagement in the self and the self's relationship to a larger cosmic idea.

**CV:** so what does your work particularly have in common with previous generations and the generation that you just addressed?

**DC:** well I think that the previous generation which sort of shaped me in a particular way has provided me with what I stated earlier about this notion of exploring art in a much deeper way philosophically and also vision that and I'm much more interested in the things that are not direct that is that they work often obliquely that the meaning is somewhere out here not just right in front of your face even though it might present something to you which appears to be this it really is about that and I think that the Surrealists and the abstract expressionists and people like that were really looking out here in a particular way for me and young people their irreverence and their sense of you know its not all serious it can't be all serious is a kind of is a slight play on Sesame Street you know having grown up with a kind of Sesame Street and Oscar the Grouch attitude but at the same time a kind of Kermit the Frog sense of lightness is something that I think is really quite humorous and there is a kind of humor that they bring that I think is really quite wonderful and so it invigorates me in a particular way I like that aspect of their sort of postmodern irreverent attitude about life.

**CV:** so you had that in common?

**DC:** yeah yeah I mean I dig that.  
12:49?

**CV:** you mentioned [Norman] Lewis and you also mention Buford DeLaney and I was wondering you know like and I notice that you have a book you know like with deLaney's picture with de Kooning maybe you take that out as I ask this question.

...

**DC:** could you hold on one second because I forgot it.

**CV:** Oh you forgot?

**DC:** but you could take a photograph of it and I could send it and you could lay it into your video.

**CM:** yeah

**DC:** so we could still talk about it

**CM:** Yeah

**DC:** ...You see I could email...he could lay it into the

**CV:** could you do that?

**CM:** yeah definitely

**DC:** because all we're going to do is mention it ok so let me talk now

**CV:** ok so I'm gonna ask you the question

**DC:** ok are you ready?

...

**CV:** Ok what having mentioned

**DC:** Norman Lewis

**CV:** And also

**DC:** Beuford Delaney yeah sure

**CV:** I'm wondering what is left out of the art histories that we know and that we are familiar with? We I know we'll talk about "we."

**DC:** ok first of all the history of art is always written to satisfy the interests of the power structure within the society that the art history is being taught in and we came up in an extraordinarily racist cultural aesthetic in the United States of America It is very much connected to Europe and anything outside of Europe was associated with the *other* now certainly the segregation which is one absolutism in America throughout its history was still in play in the 20th century and it was in the 1950s and 40s that the Civil Rights movement was beginning to emerge so certainly in the arts when art Alfred Barr and Rosenberg and also Clement Greenberg were articulating what Abstract Expressionism was they were satisfied ideals which were based on a kind of Eurocentric notion of the world and they were absolutely working to justify and insist on that it still persists today the context of that however which they sort of didn't concentrate on in art history was the notion that African Americans particularly Hale Woodruff Norman Lewis were deeply involved in that whole sort of seed of art Studio 35 kind of context that was going on in New York at the time and Norman Lewis for example was very much involved in organizing some of the places that people would hang out in and really discuss these issues but when Barr and others were deciding what the

16:14 phenology the physical look of Abstract Expressionism would be they favored a particular look Norman Lewis and others were interested not only in the existentialist aspect because of course they were they were very engaged in Kiltgard and many of the other writers and philosophers who were of importance to abstract expressionists at that time and very much engaged in the dialog however they also lived in Harlem and they came from a community that was interested in other kinds of frameworks one of them was music and the whole revolution that was taking place in music which Bebop was the tradition that came out of that context was very much connected to the human qualities so they were interested in a kind of physical representation which suggested figuration this was an anathema to the idea that artists who were trying to get away from the notion of that would work over here also their physical form the way they treated the surface of the canvas was not as dense in terms of paint handling as a Pollock or say a de Kooning but not much less dense than Norman Rockwell or certainly the sort of brains of the Abstract Expressionism movement the zith man of Barnett Newman so from that point of view we make a conscious choice and that choice had a lot to do I think ultimately with Barr and those others interested in making sure that their moneyed crowd would not be in sense with this

18:33plane/playing or giving the same sense of agency to these artists as they were to the others and so we wind up getting a lot more information and paying homage to the gods that they created called de Kooning and the others and the photograph which I spoke to you about is a photograph where both Barr and other major players in this abstract expressionist context at the Museum of Modern Art were seated and over in the corner on the left sort of in the dark is this little young dude by the name of Norman Lewis who is right there but never discussed and in any serious way by any of the historians who came through the 21st century but wonderfully there is a whole generation of young people African Americans among them thank goodness who are reshaping reinvestigating the notion of this magnificent and most powerful period in American history and stripping the biased way that art historians have dealt with this period to open up a dialog which is much more large not inclusive large then the narrow cast that was taking place in the 20th century by this unfortunate 19th century notion that art history was plagued with for most of the 20th century.

**CV:** ok I got a quick question for you I'm gonna leave or two questions with you just in terms of your own art and in terms of what you know about other people who have worked you know like that you've admired- audience who for what for?

**DC:** well audience is a weird thing first of all audience is important to the extent that communication is important so that they can be engaged and human beings can engage in a dialog with each other visually and auditorially and so that's always important but for the maker audience is absolutely and always secondary should be.

**CV:** does the canon and or the exclusion of women and artists of color affect your practice and if so how?

**DC:** well it not only affects my practice it affects everyone's practice

**CV:** how so?

**DC:** to live in a world where you only respond to and have the opportunity to engage a shaped group of individuals that you are shaping the way I see the world through providing me with the opportunity to see only a few of the myriad possibilities in the universe is to limit my capacity and therefore limit my ability as a maker because unless I am a seeker I would never have the opportunity to see beyond the shaping that you have provided me and the shaping that you have provided me that you do provide me is one that attempts to make me see through your eyes it does not open up the possibility for my own eyes and that affects/effects me deeply because I have to spend so much of my time as a maker trying to find out what else I did not gain from the exclusion of a larger dialog when I was developing as young people are doing today and therefore to have grown up learning art history and never hearing about women in a serious way diminishes me as a maker in a serious way. To come up in a class where all I saw were the images of white gods of art extraordinary as they are and were is to diminish me but not me because they didn't have much ultimate affect/effect on me because I became they forced me to become a seeker their absence forced me to become a seeker they have a great affect/effect on the generations to come if the seekers among us had not come to create a critique against that history that predominated much of the 20th century.

**CV:** okay now we're going to get down into it Dewey. What dues or misunderstandings have you had to pay as an artist for believing in your way of making art?

**DC:** well let me say that I paid justified dues. When you have a vision this is a kind of existentialist notion its very much connected to the early part of the 20th century or that part of the 20th century that we're talking about right now where Abstract Expressionism sort of opened the doors to this. That is that you got to pay whatever you make you make a decision to follow the atomized air that you perceive you're in trouble in a world which has absolutely and should have absolutely no interest in what atomized air you're taking in and therefore you got dues because that's your vision nobody else's but without it you don't have Abstract Expressionism you have a new way of seeing the world if you don't follow the necessity of your being which forces you're way of seeing the universe then we would have no Mozart no Monk no Train no Jimi Hendrix you know we would have no Aretha [Franklin] and ultimately you know we would have no real sense of the full self.

**CV:** okay now we're really going to get close down to it

**DC:** alright

**CV:** okay what dues were paid from the misunderstandings of your art from say your community ethnic or otherwise?

**DC:** well

**CV:** do your neighbors understand you? Your shit?

**DC:** you know I think no. Everyone sees things in their own way in their own time and of course a lot of the early part of my life was spent trying to communicate to a large audience that would understand what I was doing and it produced a kind of didacticism in my work which ultimately was a great danger and was not connected to me but connected to an idea that I pursued and I think that in our attempts to recover that we have to be cognizant of the necessity to not know to not know that you don't know and that not knowing is ok and if your community doesn't know that's okay too because you don't need to know everything about what is going to be made in fact you want to often be ignorant of what's going to be made because one of the great problems I think with our contemporary notion is that we prescribe what art ought to be that is that art ought to somehow engage us in a way that makes us think about something differently than we had thought about it before well right there you've lost the point to say that art ought to provide you with a way of perceiving something or knowing something is already to have killed it the one thing that is magical and extraordinary about making is you don't know what this shit is going to do and you don't know what is going to knock you out you don't know where it is going to go so if you're interest is to have it bzzz [makes the sound of an electric shock] every time you look at it bzzz you're going to be bzzz and if you can't be bzzz then you are not really being moved by art then you are in trouble because art's purpose is not to bzzz that's not its purpose Its purpose is to be and that's a kind of existentialist notion and it's a kind of confused notion in our current context but ultimately once the [gala/gale ? WORD] of this thing is gone the reality is that arts purpose is to be. That's its only purpose.

**CV:** okay I got another one for you I mean I'm probably not going to ask this question of every artist but I've always thought I've always had the greatest admiration for you as an artist and also as a person who is a family man who has been with your same wife for over thirty years and you have kids and you sent them to college and still I mean you know you're doing it on a salary that is not you know I mean we're not going to make Forbes 500 on this so I mean you know like I'm just going to put the question to you right now Dewey, How the hell did you do it?

**DC:** this probably doesn't have anything to do with what we are talking about

**CV:** yes it does

**DC:** well let me say this that I come from a tradition of extraordinary black women and men but particularly black women and very often they are opposites you know my wife is a teacher not like me as a professor but in her way of being and if you pay attention to her just as another person then you know that you are looking at and listening to an extraordinary thing now that means that we also have different conclusions about things often you know often [laughing] often but that is the stuff that is human and that is the stuff of making that's the stuff of making that life is a making and if what I've noticed about great artists great artists is that they are what they are as they are and you have to accept them as they are. What [Pablo] Picasso created took Picasso not a notion of Picasso, Picasso so if you are going to look at what he made and you have to make his

lifestyle something that helps you look at it that's your diminishment that's your loss of looking opportunity not Picasso. Picasso made his work it can be reshaped for any time but you don't get closer to Picasso and you lose more of yourself by wanting Picasso's personality to be Picasso's art now what I mean by that is that you don't get blue and green or kind of blue without the present darkness so if you want that you need the present darkness if you want Agnes Martin you have to accept the quietude that she brought to get to Martin you don't get to Martin by trying to make her. Georgia O'Keeffe it ain't happening you see what I'm saying? So I say that when you pay attention to what life requires you let it take its course and it doesn't have to always agree with you. 80% of the time or 60% 70% of the time my wife don't agree with me but neither did my mother you hear what I'm saying? Or my father or my kids so you know I mean how people put it together in their personal lives I think is very different to discern and while I have been with an important source for many years you know they're not over yet so one would never know [laughing] what the fullness of life brings but you know hopefully [laughs] hopefully. Suppose this agreement will always be put in context so my point is we live a deep and powerful life and my children hopefully will be powerful enough and well rounded enough to do the same thing.

**CV:** right on Dewey thank you

**DC:** right on man right on okay great

**CV:** well hey listen send over

**DC:** we'll get that picture together. [To Charlie] Can you email me?

**CM:** yeah

**CV:** I want you to send another picture either of how you want to represent this interview you know either with your work de Kooning's work [laughing] I don't know how you want to do it

**DC:** right

**CV:** is that cool Charlie?

**CM:** yeah

**CV:** that's a great interview

END