

Conversation

The following are edited excerpts from a conversation between Luca Antonucci and Matt Borruso, curators of the exhibition David King Publications 1977–2019, held on December 6, 2024 on the occasion of its first staging at the San Francisco Center for the Book. The discussion was moderated by David Senior, Director of Library at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

DAVID SENIOR In the context of what we’re doing, I am always impressed by people who are working towards projects that pay homage to friends or mentors or people that helped shape something about one’s own practice or thought process. I think this is something that’s happening here.

MATT BORRUSO Much of what David produced was very personal. For example, the book *The Journey* was made towards the end of his life, when he was looking back at his life, his friends, his work, and his inspirations. And the very last book he made was *Stencils: Past, Present and Crass!* which consisted primarily of the stencils he had made in the 2000s reworking the Crass symbol. I felt that *Stencils* was a full circle moment for David. The Crass symbol and the stencils were the things he had been best known for early on. I helped him with the texts for this book, and he got a copy just weeks before he passed away in October of 2019. That was five years ago, and we’ve been organizing his archive since that time. This has included sorting the work, developing a biography and a timeline, trying to frame his project in an objective way, and building a narrative structure that we can work from and that others can understand.

DS There’s this aspect to David’s later biography—an intergenerational connection with the artists and other people working in the small press artist book world who were looking towards putting out the work that he had been doing, to recirculate it into this other world forming around book fairs, which is the kind of thing that Luca helps organize. I wanted to give Luca a chance to talk about that relationship, or the beginnings of that collaboration with David, and this long arc that exists within this publication and exhibition.

LUCA ANTONUCCI Yes, thanks. Something you said in the beginning, about David being formative for my

publishing practice, was very much true. When I first met David in 2015 I had been making a lot of zines with a stencil duplicator, known as a Risograph. The Risograph was originally a competing technology to the photocopier, and David and I initially bonded over that machine. He invited me to his house, and as soon as I saw his work, it really helped me think about where I wanted to go with Colpa Press, my publishing project. I had started to develop an interest in artists’ side projects—like their collections—and I was trying to publish some of those projects. I found with David there was no distinction between his collections and his art practice. The way he made books was to seamlessly organize images from his life, his artwork, his designs, and his collections. This idea was something I carried over into my publishing practice, but it’s also what I wanted to explore with my own books and with David’s books. So I don’t think it’s an accident that the first book we made together was *Scrapbook* in 2017. David kept five or six scrapbooks that he would work on periodically. They weren’t assigned to particular years—he would jump between them. And there was this real temporal confusion when you were looking at them. Pages would be left alone for years and then returned to later when he would paste something else in. So the visual look of it was very disorienting. You couldn’t place it as a punk zine—it wasn’t so easily identifiable.

I was also interested in David’s history as a designer, and how that was so immediately evident in his work as an artist and in his work within the punk community. It was a weird blend. I think for a lot of people who are less familiar with this work, it can seem very austere, very black and white, but David was very much a color-driven artist when I met him. The work had that paste-up sensibility, but at the same time it looked like nothing else I had ever seen. So *Scrapbook*, which was kind of a reproduction of his scrapbook pages, was a perfect example of that.

I think if we go a bit deeper into the flyers, not the design work, but the show flyers and zines, you get into an aesthetic of using found images or commercial images, and this appropriation of pop images is something we see throughout the show and the book. In terms of source material he’s pulling from common print mediums like newspapers and magazines, and maybe comics.

MB I’ve looked at a lot of David’s stuff, and he was definitely very interested in comics, from early childhood until the end of his life. Batman, Sluggo, Jack Kirby images, and other comic-book characters and references turn up again and again in his work. When you look at a lot of his collages and zines you have to understand that at that time, in the ’70s and ’80s, there

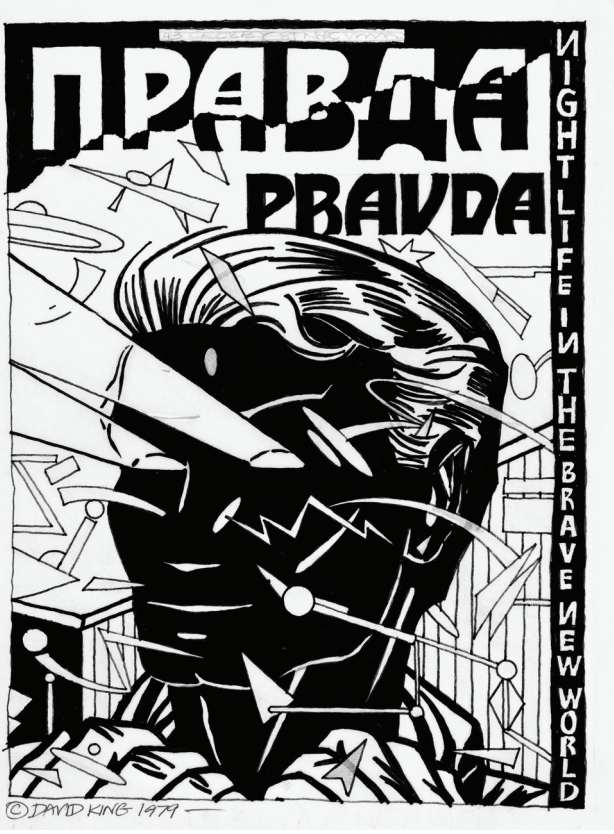
was a limited amount of print material available for appropriation. There’s just less stuff to pull from at that point. So you begin to recognize the ubiquitous images that came from the *San Francisco Chronicle* or *National Geographic*, or the *New York Times* or *Life* magazine. That’s where a lot of his sources are coming from.

DS At this point, it’s also an in-between moment in terms of how one would self identify as an artist, as a designer, as a musician. What would be the answer, do you think for David at that time? He seems to have been in between a lot of different things.

MB I think for David, he started out as a designer and an artist, and then joined a band—and it was the band that generated so much of his artwork. The band was the prompt. He wouldn’t just make one flyer for a show, he would make four or five versions. Five different flyers for one show is completely unnecessary. But enthusiasm was high, and there was a lot of activity, a lot of making. My sense is that he was finally creating his own work after years of client-driven projects in commercial art direction and graphic design.

DS This segues into an open question about a practice, like one’s practice that is more about collecting and absorbing material culture—in this case print culture—and then recirculating or repurposing it. I connect that with some of the things that both of you are drawn to. How it works in the publishing of these books, I think, is the most interesting thing because you create this montage effect. Luca, you would have experience with that sort of conversation about montage with found images and publishing work.

LA For sure. Part of it is just working with someone repeatedly. That’s something that I’m really interested in. I want to make 10 books with the same artist just to really explore their practice. And I got to make five with David, which is a lot. For example, *The Journey* book that came up earlier is such a revisiting of the *Scrapbook* project. It was almost like him re-interpreting the publishing work that we did together, going back into his life and trying to build a new scrapbook. That’s what’s really unique about his practice—that you see it evolve over time. A lot of people in self-publishing are really resistant to these changes, but David just fully embraced them. Even the print-on-demand books. They’re not just vehicles for his bookmaking, they’re perfect examples of what the technology is good for. He’d have simple ideas—like a screen grab of every death scene that happened in a specific film. It was just a one liner, and I’d see other people struggle with that format so much, and he really figured out how to use it. I admired that about his practice—the way he would remix his images and ideas for whatever format he was presented with.



Original drawing for Pravda Nightclub, New York, 1979
Pen and ink on vellum, 12 x 16.5 in. (30.5 x 41.9 cm)

DS It’s interesting to circle back to this new book in the context of that collaboration. This might be a hard question, but was his voice in the room? Did you think about this conversation that you had been having when you were designing the book?

MB No, I think we were just trying to present the work in a flat, straight-ahead way. A lot of what David made was very personal—like *The Journey* or his scrapbooks—and often there was no wall between him and what he was making. I think David would have designed this book completely differently. All you have to do is compare the books he made for Luca with this one. It’s the same material, but presented in a very different way. In making a book about a graphic designer it felt right that our design should take a back seat to his work.

LA I think it comes down to the fact that you can only make artist books with artists. It’s so much different to make a book when you’re not making it with them anymore.