

**Re-inscribing the Subtle Mark:
Human Presence, Digital Interface, and the Anxiety of Language in the
Installation of Dave Tarullo**

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As you enter the gallery, the first you see of Dave Tarullo's installation is the diffused glow of gallery lights reflecting from the clean faces of the nearly three hundred tiles he's suspended into a single, seemingly weightless, wave-like form. The wave's lowest point—roughly thigh-high on a person of average size—is towards the front, from which it arcs upward and backward into a curved swell roughly eight feet in height. Each tile is shaped like a computer keyboard key, reminiscent of the Macintosh keyboards of the early 2000's, and the keys are largely blank. The few exceptions are easy to miss at first glance; a "1" or "0" rendered with distinct gloss may catch the light as you approach the form, only to fade away again when your relationship to the light changes. Each tile hangs individually from four threads, one at each corner, and looking through these into the rising form, one gets the impression of a forest of fine, almost fragile lines.

The first and most compelling draw on your attention, however, is the clear opening within the form itself, visible before you've fully entered the gallery. As you approach the piece, the opening holds your attention, inviting you to pass through the intimidating surface of the form into an unknown space. The first impulse anyone can have is to enter. One inside, the piece changes. The strings are less visible, now, and the weightlessness of the form is amplified. Also, the tiles reveal themselves to be translucent, transforming the white light of the gallery into a warm, yellowed glow that echoes the natural wood floor beneath. It is more spacious than you might expect, and the effect is of a certain stillness, a serene and reflective silence not unlike those we tend to associate with places of worship. And, as the vaulted ceilings of a cathedral may draw the eye upward, so too does the curving interior of the wave.

Of course, the way these square tiles are arranged against each other in rows forms an unmistakable grid. However, there is an irregular quality to the tiles' suspension—tiles may be slightly askance, spinning on their strings, touching, or even partially overlapping. There are occasional gaps, or places where the angle of the tile breaks the smooth line of the wave form, if only slightly. Additionally, the interior of the form reveals new variations. Though outwardly similar for the most part, from beneath, we can see shifts in density revealing light patches and dark streaks in the faces of each tile. Some are marked with drip patterns. Some have supports, and others do not. Some are cracked, revealing sharp bright lines in the surface above, and many of the edges are warped. Though the piece as a whole suggests the rigidity and intimidation of a grid, from the inside, we see that the pieces are individuated by their details or flaws, and the nature of the form as a whole is revealed to be organic, and, strangely, human.

It is precisely this 'humanness' is that Tarullo's title is referring to. During one of our impromptu interviews, Tarullo described the "subtle mark" as the result of those infinite variations present in the handwritten word or note (a hard line or a soft one, for example; a compressed letter, misspelled word, or stray mark,) which may convey meaningful information about the experience of the writer in the moment of transcription.

If, for example, the writer were experiencing a strong emotion—or if they were merely tired, rushed, anxious, meditative, careful, or careless—a record of this would remain in their work afterwards, accessible, even as a mere impression, to whomever might read their note in the future. While still capable of capturing the subtle mark, any form of communication is in some way precious as an artifact of the direct, temporal and corporeal experience of a human being.

The question Tarullo's piece asks us is this: Is the digital interface in fact capable of capturing these subtle marks?

Particularly interesting to me is the series of formal choices Tarullo has made in order to articulate this question: notably, his decision not to use any digital media in the creation of a piece dedicated to interrogating the capacity and effect of digital forms of communication. From the outside, it would seem evident to rely on projections of digital interface, text-to-binary mistranslations, or even some form of interactive web-based program in order to articulate the loss of human presence or meaning that Tarullo fears the digital world may induce. However, the keys are crafted from porcelain, suspended on heavy thread from an elaborate rigging system (including, among other things, a good hundred feet of paracord and a twenty-foot steel beam) concealed between three false walls Tarullo built into the galley himself. The sheer weight—literally and figuratively, both—of the materiality involved is no accident: it is clear that Tarullo's translation of digital aesthetic into traditional, tangible mediums was an intentional one.

In this same interview, Tarullo discussed the material decisions of the installation:

“I think the process of building the work is about...trying to find a way to trust a digital world that doesn't have that analog record. Is there feedback in the digital world? [I am] trying to understand where that feedback is. This is an opportunity to enter into that digital space...and to have a physical experience in a conceptual landscape.”

The creation of this entirely *material* translation of the digital aesthetic, or digital “conceptual landscape” is therefore a meaningful one. In so doing, Tarullo has created an alternative to the digital sphere; a proxy, so to speak, through which he may interact with the digital sphere on his terms, and invite his audience to do the same.

Tarullo's decisions about scale follow this same thread. In a world of possibilities, Tarullo chose to represent the keyboard at such a scale that the average human body may not only physically enter it, but stand comfortably (peacefully, and reflectively) once inside.

Nor should it be disregarded that the keys are constructed out of porcelain, specifically, and that porcelain as a material carries certain automatic symbologies: that of fragility, refinement, beauty, and domesticity. In his use of porcelain, Tarullo utilizes the domestic associations of the material to reinforce that sense of serenity, safety, and beauty into the interior of his form—which is, as we've established, a proxy for that digital landscape into which he is hoping to introduce trust. Tarullo speaks, also, of regarding the digital landscape—and, in fact, language systems in general—as fragile. He means this in the sense that the translation from direct experiences into language of any kind often leads to a kind of simplification or “flattening”—a loss of nuance, depth, and

authentic immediacy—creating an anxiety and subsequent frailty in one’s relationship to these systems. His use of such a notoriously fragile material as porcelain in this installation naturally represents a reference to this concept as well.

It is the nature of artwork to come into its own, symbolically, after completion. The work refines its conceptual structure over the course of its development and the act of being viewed and having the audience inscribe the work with new complex meanings is the final step away from whatever conceptual point of origin it may have originally stemmed from. In the case of *The Subtle Mark*, much has changed, and whatever reason Tarullo may have had for originally embarking on this project has since receded into the privacy of his individual experience.

He does, however, give us a hint.

So subtle as to appear and vanish with a shift of light, the “1”s and “0”s inscribed on the surfaces of those occasional keys are not, in fact, random. More than simply referencing binary aesthetic or the abstract concept of language’s deconstruction into basic pulses of electricity, this particular sequence can, in fact, be read. Converted back from its binary deconstruction, the surface of the keys read: *me, you, us*.

The message is deconstructed, obtuse, inaccessible to the majority of the audience at any length of glance, and well outside of the reach of corporeal experience. At our level of understanding, there is nothing to suggest any analogue record or mark, however subtle, inscribed in the body of the message—yet, the message nevertheless reveals the presence of something vulnerable, sincere, and most definitely human.