

The Paradox of Identity

In the rooms of the civic museum housed in the Castle of Barletta, Peter Campus—together with his wife, the photographer Kathleen Graves, and his Italian friend, the video artist Antonio Trimani—finishes mounting the monitors for his new series of installations: *Lobster Boats*, *Ponquogue Fish Dock*, *Teak* and others. They show static images and urban landscapes, but mostly glimpses of the seaside, filmed around Long Island where the artist has lived for many years now.

These vistas, however, are pixelated and reworked in such a way that they become abstract. If you look at them from a distance and take them in all at once, these images maintain their figurative contours. If you come in closer, however, you see the elements of these images in the form of squares and rectangles of pulsating color. On the one hand, Campus affirms in these works his interest in the photograph, or rather in an image in movement that tends towards stasis, towards solidification; on the other, these images approach the realm of painting. And painting was indeed Campus's first love, ever since he was a teenager.

But Campus, rather than responding to questions about his past, prefers to talk about the present, and about this kind of digital painting that, over the past several years, has come to constitute a new phase in his activity as an artist. It cannot be forgotten, however, that Campus, now 77, has been a pioneer in the field of video art since 1971, the year in which he realized single channel works like *Dynamic Field Series* and *Double Vision*.

In a period in which the video camera was usually fixed in one place—a bit like the movie camera during the early years of cinema, when the different “planes” still didn't exist and montage had not yet been invented—Campus moved it with incredible freedom. This is evidenced in the vignettes of *Dynamic Field Series*, where the artist filmed his feet as he walks continuously along the wooden floor of his studio, and dangled the camera from a cable high above, so that it rotated on an axis as it filmed him, alternately drawing nearer and moving away.

Double Vision, too, falls under the emblem of absolute mobility. Although filmed in black and white and in low definition, this work contains the aesthetic that would come to inform Campus's subsequent projects: the use of the apparatus to explore the relationship between individual/vision/space, according to a perceptual-phenomenological perspective. Two cameras are used in this work, and they produce a kind of split vision that expresses itself in different phases (and actions), entitled “relocation,” “disparity,” “convergence,” “fusion” and so on. In the first section, for example, in an intersecting fade-out, Campus blends the images produced by two video cameras that wander around a single interior. In the second chapter, the artist himself enters into the split field, and, in the last, the same setting is shot from the inside of a monitor placed on the table. Space, therefore, is always the product of the duplicity of the medium, which creates fractures and superimpositions.

After this work, Campus's conversation came to focus above all on the relationship between the apparatus of the camera and the body of the performer. This occurred when, with the passage from black and white to color and with the use of chroma key and other effects, Campus's video art underwent a sharp qualitative jump. His *Three Transitions* (1973) remains to this day Campus's most famous piece, and among the most celebrated in the history of electronic arts. Through the use of the techniques of inlaying and the intersecting fade-out in real time, the artist realized three short essays

on the paradox of identity in its relationship with video technology. In the first episode, Campus opens a narrow passage in a screen, allowing himself to enter into his back; in the second he electronically erases his face in order to allow his “double” to emerge; finally, in the third, he sets fire to a close-up of an inlaid image of himself inside of a frame.

Three Transitions was made for Boston’s famous WGBH-TV, one of the first television broadcasting stations to institute a workshop for the production of experimental videos—for example, *The Medium is the Medium*—which included the work of six artists, Kaprow and Paik among them. Stan van der Beek—film- and video-maker and inventor of the Movie Drome and, thus, of an expanded way of making use of cinema—obtained an artist-in-residence position at this very network. Campus, thanks to WGBH-TV, had the opportunity from 1973 to 1976 to make use of technologies that were not available to all artists. Other works sprang forth from this opportunity, including *Set of Coincidence* (1974), *R-G-B* (1974) and *Four Sided Tape* (1976), in which Campus experiments with inlaying, feedback, the dosage of colors by means of filters, etc. In some videos, such as *East Ended Tape* (1976), *Third Tape* (1976) or *Six Fragments* (1976), the effects are limited or are totally “natural” (light, smoke). Campus focuses his attention on the performative act and on the relationship between illusion and reality, sometimes utilizing real actors and curating quite particularly the *mise-en-scène* and the composition of single frames.

During the 1970s, Campus also realized various closed-circuit installations (CCVC), like *Interface* (1972), where the spectator sees himself split in the form of video image and, at the same time, reflected upside-down, and also *Bys* (1975) and *Aen* (1976). As Wulf Herzogenrath observes, “Campus’s interests have nothing to do with narcissism, but rather address the question of man’s identity—the true ego, the meaning of the shadow, the fear of the alter ego, the ‘mask of the self,’ the double.”

During the 1980s, Campus stopped working with video, and dedicated himself for a long time to landscape photography, only to come back to the deployment of the video camera in the second half of the ‘90s, shooting *Winter Journal*. From this moment, the works of this American artist—which someone once called “visual haikus”—were above all based on nature. They are communicated through a small number of frames accompanied by music and structured in a very particular montage, with re-framed sequences (that is, inserted inside frames) to better restore the mobility of vision, an “animal-like vision,” as Campus defines it.

What drove you in the early 1970s to start working with videotape and video installations? What were you searching for in this new instrument that had started, already for a few years by then, to become more diffused in the artistic field?

I always wanted to be an artist. I started painting when I was 13, but my father wouldn’t let me be a figurative artist and so when I enrolled in college I studied cinema. As a result I ended up working in the film industry as an editor. For this reason, it was difficult for me to liberate myself from my training and education in that field. Then I discovered video, which instantly fascinated me. Video was immediate: you could make, watch, remake and re-watch, and thus it corresponded much more to what you had in mind and the choices you’d made, as opposed to cinema, which at the time necessitated longer processes and, most of all, waiting for the outcome.

How come you never made any experimental films?

I made one, to tell you the truth, but I think it's terrible and I hope no one ever sees it.

But you still love cinema very much, I imagine...

Yes, absolutely. When I was 13 I would always go to this movie theater in New York where they showed English films. I was an enthusiast of Michael Powell and some of his masterpieces, like *Red Shoes* or *Peeping Tom*...

Another element that I consider essential to your early works is the performative. Some of your single channel videos are a kind of video-performance, in that they consist of actions that are carried out by you yourself, but that are conceived to exploit the potentialities of the apparatus.

I have to say that at the time I was very narcissistic, but the inclination for performance derived from the fact that during the '60s I was very close to the Judson Dance Theater, a performers' movement that met at the Judson Memorial Church in Greenwich Village. And it was there that I filmed my first video work. Figures like Yvonne Rainer and Steve Paxton were part of that scene, as were Terry Riley, Trisha Brown and others...

What do you remember, more generally, about the underground scene in New York at that time?

It was a fantastic period, and a very stimulating one. At night in Soho—at the time it wasn't even called that—we would go to see one of Rainer's shows, and then we would all get together at someone's home to listen to a piece of music by Philip Glass or Steve Reich; then we'd go out again and we'd go drink and talk about art. Nothing was organized, it was all word of mouth—whoever knew would go, and something would happen, without it being filmed or recorded in any way. It would simply just happen. Unfortunately it didn't last long, maybe four years or so, between 1968 and 1972. Uncertain but magical years. After that, art started to become more commercial again; everyone stopped working together and started to compete. Everything ended just like that, and it was really too bad. I think this is something that science has and art doesn't: scientists almost always work together, but artists do not. And for this reason I was very pleased to exhibit at the Castle of Barletta, together with my wife Kathleen and with Antonio Trimani. We are three separate people who work on the same themes in different ways, but in the end there's a convergence, and the visitor leaves the exposition having understood a single meaning that connects our work.

How much has your training as a psychologist mattered in your art?

When I studied psychology, more than half a century ago, there were many studies on the functions of the brain and its sensoriality. It was then that the cognitive parts of the brain began to be defined, by studying how the senses had developed in animals and in humans. I have always been fascinated by the elements related to perception and, consequently, this interest has always informed my work.

Nevertheless, you've never taught psychology...

No, with my degree in psychology I've taught exclusively in university art departments, which is something that my colleagues have always found hilarious.

What do you remember about your experience at WGBH-TV in Boston?

Having worked for ten years in commercial cinema, I found myself at ease in film studios. And this helped me a lot when I was making my videos at WGBH, because there were very competent technicians and wonderful equipment. Moreover, I had a budget at my disposal (not to mention that one of the roles I had performed in the film world was precisely to calculate precautionary balances). Different from the other artists, who preferred to exalt the low resolution of the video image, I liked higher quality images, in color. Color has always been important to me; now it is more than ever. The only handicap was not being able to work in my studio—that and the fact that my team didn't always understand what I was doing, beginning with the producer Fred Barzyk, who would always say "What is this lunatic doing?" In any event, I remember it as an excellent experience.

How come you stopped working in video in 1979 and dedicated yourself to photography? Did you think that a phase of your work had concluded? That experimentation in this medium had run dry?

I stopped working in video because I wanted the image to remain, but I realized that I wasn't a photographer. What interested me, then, was not photography, but the freezing of an image, the creation of a fixed image within the video. I like this method, seeing as it creates a lot of tension. While the viewer doesn't expect the image to move in photography, in video it's just the opposite.

The great change in my aesthetic came in the moment when I stopped looking inside and I began to turn my gaze outward. Every time that I imagine a video, I have in mind a clear vision and I try to work with what I feel. What comes to be when I film an image in nature is the interaction that is created between me and my subject. I often think, for example, of the German photographer August Sander, whose specialty was portraits. When the Nazi regime prevented him from taking photos of common people, he was forced to photograph nature. Many of his landscapes of the Rhine are not formally beautiful, in part because they're too dark, but they are beautiful for the emotional force that they emanate. I have to say that I find inspiration for my work with this kind of intensity.

In the '90s, you came back to video, to grapple with the digital image. How did you experience this change from analog to digital?

When I was teaching, I had a Korean student who was very rich and who bought one of the first digital systems. As his instructor, I saw his work improve entirely, and so I thought that I should buy one as well, but I was not rich and so I had to find someone to finance the purchase for me. I saw the improvements immediately, especially with regards to editing.

It seems to me that the concept of time in your videos, with regards to the discussion we had earlier about the relationship between the fixed image and the moving image, is essential.

In my projects, I don't think about the concept of "time;" instead, what comes to mind is the formula dx/dt , which calculates the movement of a point with regards to time. The things that we see are actually the product of the connection of many different happenings strung together. As today's physics is by now coming to discover, perception does not belong to mechanical time as much as it belongs to perceived time. When someone asks the duration of a video, I tell him that, for example, it is 25 minutes and 32 seconds long, but my videos are conceived for both the person who sees them for ten seconds and then walks away and the person who wants to watch

them in their entirety. What changes is the difference in the visual experience: someone who chooses to stay longer enters, remains, relaxes himself and thus passes from a mechanical vision to a dimension of pure temporal perception. It's like when you take a drive in your car and, after a little while, you lose your sense of time, seeing as how you're simply going from one place to another. It's like standing still. And so I seek to lead the viewer into an extratemporal dimension.

How come in your installations you don't use video projectors but only monitors, and thus apparatuses fitted with corners?

It's a question that would require a long and structured answer. For now, let's just say that some artists—and practically all students—want to create their works using video projectors. But the colors get washed out, and you don't reach that specific intensity of color, and, moreover, you never get an absolute black: there's always a little bit of light that disrupts the image. These are all problems that disappear when you use LCD or LED screens, which, among other things, are continually getting bigger and more refined. There isn't just a technical motivation, but a conceptual one as well. Art has a lot to do with the physicality of things. When you watch a film—and I'm talking about a narrative film—you lose yourself, and you identify with the actor, whereas with art what's important instead is to be there, but without losing yourself. In art, one works with material and with things. I'll say it again, and it might be a bit old-fashioned, but I like it when an image isn't too big; I prefer that it be viewed in its entirety with a glance. Observing the surface from one point to another, just like in painting, has to do with the relationship that is created between these two points. For me it is important to perceive that which is both inside and outside of the frame.

In the single channel videos that you've made after 2000, moreover, you delight in enlarging and then shrinking the frame.

I need to create this movement in the image, a bit like animals that watch even while in constant movement. Humans do it, too, but with animals we perceive this visual mobility even more. The continued transformation of the frame has for me a lot to do with sense, sensoriality, perception and visual fields.

Even in the past, it doesn't seem to me that you were ever attracted to the expanded possibilities of an image in movement, by multi-channel installations...

When I was a film editor, I worked on some really impressive projects for clients, conceived perhaps to be projected on six screens as part of a global exhibition, but to be honest they weren't all that innovative from the point of style, just cinema that was a bit more expansive. I was more interested in helping the evolution of technology along in the field of television. For example, I was fascinated by the first TV consoles, with so many monitors placed one next to the other, which transmitted the various points of view, and the director who could choose them each time. I would stay there in the studio to watch. One of the television programs that I often watch is called *24*. From a content point of view, it's terrible, but technically it's fascinating because it's built on the point of view of 24 cameras all simultaneously operating. It's a bit like watching a Soderbergh film, whose work, with its tonalities of color, creates a cinema that strongly evokes painting.

Speaking in terms of pictorial genres, can we say that, compared to your videos from the '70s, with your projects from the last twenty years you've moved from the portrait to the landscape?

But in a certain sense there is no difference. Before I showed the face, and now I depict that which that face—and thus its eye, or its brain, rather—sees. It is still the same emotional process. To construct these landscapes, I can sketch out the video “remotely” and walk away, allowing for shots that are taken in a kind of temporal arc; or instead I can stay there, watch, feel and thus create an interaction between me and nature. What I show in the video is what my psyche accomplishes alongside nature. One of the great problems of humanity is that we no longer have the awareness that we are one with the world around us. We’re detached. And this loss, this non-awareness, unfortunately leads us to a slow suicide.

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