

CRISTIN TIERNEY

**BROOKLYN RAIL**  
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

# PETER CAMPUS

by *Hearne Pardee*

***circa 1987***

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***video ergo sum***

GALERIE NATIONALE DU JEU DE PAUME, PARIS  
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Peter Campus, *affect*, 1987. Digital photo projection. Courtesy the artist and Cristin Tierney Gallery. © Peter Campus 2017

An aspiring painter and student of cognitive psychology, Peter Campus discovered the emerging medium of video in the late 1960s and found there the materials for a rich, career-long exploration of perception and personhood. As *video ergo sum*, a new retrospective at

the Jeu de Paume in Paris, tracks Campus's investigation of the self from early interactive installations into recent "videographs" of landscapes, key mid-career works are concurrently featured in *circa 1987* at Cristin Tierney Gallery in New York. Just as Alfred Stieglitz cultivated links between photography and the unconscious, Campus endows technologically generated images with visual richness and highly personal implications. While his contemporaries under the sway of minimalism often distanced themselves from personal content, Campus, without abandoning minimalist rigor, engaged darkly romantic themes of death and isolation. If sometimes melodramatic, Campus sustains a critical analysis of the phenomenology of perception as mediated by video, particularly as distinctive from film.

The Jeu de Paume exhibition, curated by Anne-Marie Duguet, includes dramatic early videos—like the influential *Three Transitions* (1973)—along with reconstructions of five closed-circuit installations, which coordinate cameras and projectors to capture the viewer in disorienting ways. Simultaneous projection estranges us from our bodies in *Interface* (1972) by combining a mirror reflection with a video image that shows us as we "really" appear, while *Optical Sockets* (1972 – 73) forces us to reframe our position in space by presenting our bodies in four different views. For Campus, the camera is not just an extension of the eye, as Marshall McLuhan suggested, but a "surrogate eye," an extension of the room, which Campus takes as the framework for these early explorations of the self and the visual field. *Anamnesis* (1973) introduces a temporal dislocation, projecting two images with a three-second delay, permitting engagement with both past and future. These studio-based efforts culminate in confrontational, darkly rendered projections of heads, such as *Head of a Man with Death on his Mind* (1977 – 78).

Campus, the psychologist, endeavors to get "behind the face," but the camera reveals only further layers. Abandoning what Rosalind Krauss termed the "narcissistic enclosure" of video, Campus turned in the 1980s to landscape photography. Yet even as he celebrated the reassuring objectivity of boulders near Bear Mountain, his large black and white prints lent these impersonal icons anthropomorphic

overtones. His personal engagement led him to collect small stones to photograph at home against black backgrounds, and selected specimens reappear in both *video ergo sum* and *circa 1987*.

Projected on the gallery walls of Cristin Tierney in cave-like darkness, enlarged and unframed, the still projections arouse primal responses of fear and wonder. While drawn from nature, they restore an emphasis on the room, on the place of the observer in the visual field, marking the culmination of his “looking inward and looking outward.” In curating his collection, Campus emphasizes the distinctive character and metaphorical associations of each specimen: *Half-life* (1987), hard, speckled, planetary; or *Murmur* (1987), fleshy, pitted, vulnerable. These are portraits projected into nature, tokens of the artist’s efforts at individuation. Projected at varying heights in the gallery, devoid of context, they draw us to the detailed irregularities of their surfaces, but they’re ultimately elusive. The images only remain in focus at a certain distance; closer in, they blur and dissolve into luminous clouds hovering over a delicate web of digital mesh. Encountering the wall, we learn to navigate the space, like viewers in Campus’s early installations, which Krauss cited approvingly for restoring us to the “facticity” of the room, where the aesthetics of the *Wunderkammer* meet the aesthetics of narcissism.

In Paris, the projections serve as a hinge between two sections of the exhibition, connecting early installations—with their introspective focus on identity—to the recent, externally-oriented landscapes. As Campus abandoned photography in favor of the newly developing field of digital imaging, he turned inward again, making paintings with rudimentary software that recall the primordial, nature-based abstractions of Arthur Dove, but also allude to the interior of his body. Space limitations precluded their inclusion in *video ergo sum*, but they are featured in the excellent catalogue. Using a scanner, Campus incorporated other natural objects and created digital collages like Robert Rauschenberg’s “combines” operating on what Krauss terms the “plane of memory.”

As expanded possibilities of digital editing lured Campus back to video, he reconciled the pictorial and durational components of his art

in “videographs”—hybrids of photography and video featuring extended, technologically enhanced still shots. They cultivate heightened attention but offer no particular focus. Two contrasting examples are featured in Paris: *barn at north fork* (2010), the frontal image of a barn that gradually mutates in color; and *a wave* (2009), a slow-motion study of a breaking wave inspired by a Milton Avery painting. These works not only modulate the flow of time but break up the image’s visual continuity with large rectangles of subtly changing colors that recall the early seascapes of Mondrian, or those of Nicolas de Staël.

*Convergence d’images vers le port* (2016), a work commissioned for the Paris retrospective, features extended shots of coastal scenes, simultaneously projected on all four gallery walls. Campus describes it as “anti-cinematic,” since it obliges us to shift attention across the walls. Animated by subtle movements of water and the labors of fishermen, the clips fade into black and white as they end—an allusion to the origins of video and photography in black and white, but also an intimation of mortality.

As the preternatural clarity of the new work updates the uncanny, technological magic of his earliest videos, Campus continues to render the world through the filter of video. Linking past and present, his projections of stones in particular, and their fusion of personal and geological time, assume new poignancy in light of the earth’s uncertain future.