

CRISTIN TIERNEY

HYPERALLERGIC

ART

peter campus Sees the Self in Video

In *video ergo sum*, the Bronx Museum of the Arts presents decades of work from the renowned Video artist

Patty Gone July 15, 2019



Installation view of *peter campus: video ergo sum*. (all images courtesy of the Bronx Museum of Art, photos by Argenis Apolinario)

To see yourself takes a lifetime. But if you want a shortcut, stand before the closed circuit camera of peter campus's 1973 installation piece *Anamnesis*, and it will project you onto the wall. For a brief moment, according to campus, you'll be "at the same time this image

and this self.” On a daily basis, so many of us are the stars of security cameras and various live feeds that we often routinely enact such doubling, but *Anamnesis* adds a third layer. Via a three-second delay, it projects your present self and past self simultaneously, one blurring the other, so that no self gets the final say. Seeing this, I realized that I’ve always been three: viewer, viewed, and the victim of nostalgic impulse. The installation made all three visible at once for the first time.

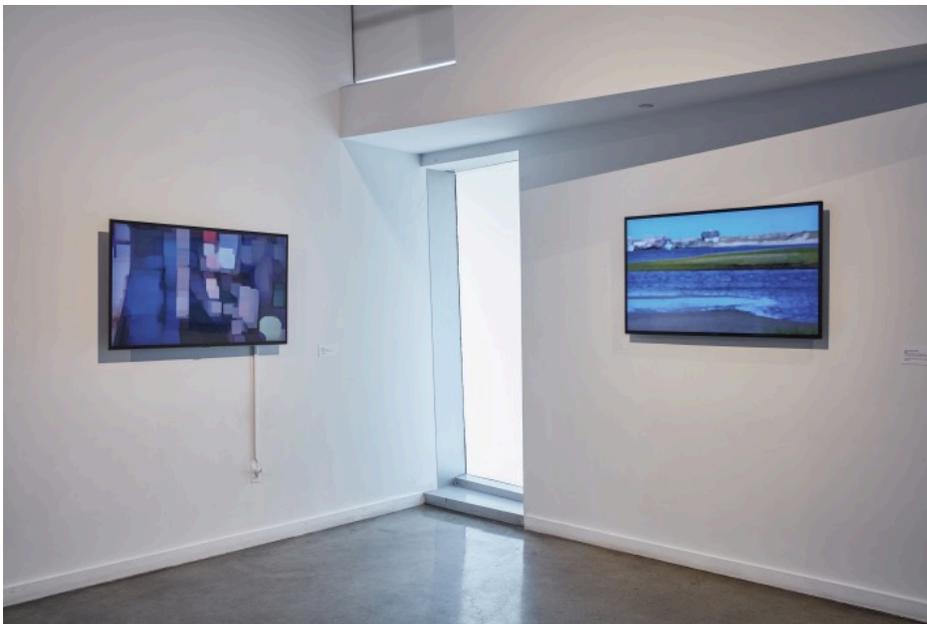
campus attempts to make the truth visual. He has spent decades training to see, considering the discrepancy between a subject and their moving image, or between a place and a place on a screen — all the result of that pesky third element, subjectivity. The name of his current solo exhibition, *video ergo sum*, which debuted at Jeu de Paume in Paris and is on view at the Bronx Museum of Art, is a riff on René Descartes’s famous philosophical Latin catchphrase *Cognito, ergo sum*, or “I think, therefore I am.” (*video* translates to “see.”) After getting a psychology degree at Ohio State, campus returned to his native New York, eventually landing a gig in video production at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Through this job he found Bruce Nauman and Joan Jonas, who inspired him to play with portable black and white video equipment. His 1970s work maps a series of proofs, methods to extract perception from a viewer’s head and include it in the image itself.



Anamnesis (1973), closed-circuit video installation, installation view

An illusionist at heart, campus's camera is a wand. Like *Anamnesis*, the 1971 piece *Kiva* aims a camera at the viewer in the gallery, this time along with two mirrors which rotate like a mobile. In what is technically a single shot, campus captures the room from infinite perspectives. The viewer's likeness appears and disappears as the twirling mirrors reveal the gallery's far-flung corners, all filtered back to a single small monitor, like ten fractured surveillance cameras in one. In his 1974 essay "Video as a Function of Reality," campus wrote about wanting to "disassociate the video camera from the eye and make it an extension of the room." The camera never leaves the viewer, but it waxes and wanes, its gaze always in flux, a lover with wandering eyes.

In the video *Three Transitions*, campus's most famous work, he places himself in the hot seat. In one moment, he appears to cut a hole through his own back and then, like magic, put his own body through the hole. It's a trick made possible by chroma key technology, an early form of green screen. In another shot, he sets fire to his own moving image, blinking and alive, and he and the viewer both watch it burn. It's a comedic but vastly dark film. By the end of the '70s, the exhaustion of undergoing such self-interrogations led him to an extended hiatus from video.



Dusk at Shinnecock Bay (2010), videograph.

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video ergo sum slices itself equally between these '70s experiments and work from the last 15 years, which find campus sliding not just from analog to digital, but also from portrait to landscape. During his break, he escaped into photographing the outdoors. If he previously merged his camera with the room, it's now become one with nature. He still strips video to its constituent parts, but his subject has shifted to Long Island's South Shore.

From a distance, *Dusk at Shinnecock Bay* feels out of place, like a landscape painting from a seaside Airbnb. A closer look reveals that it's a 25-minute shot of water gliding across the bay, yet campus has buried the scene's natural beauty beneath pixelated, subpar resolution. *A wave*, a 24-minute static shot of shoreline, doubles down on this digital tinkering, with pixels so large and rectangular that they resemble brushstrokes. Waves arriving and receding feel like a Rothko painting tumbling over itself in slow motion.



Installation view of *peter campus: video ergo sum*. (all images courtesy of the Bronx Museum of Art)



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Nature can feel as alien as the self. Both are all-consuming, and therefore impossible to see. For a lifelong urban dweller, the countryside can appear two-dimensional, beauty confined to recreations on product packaging, ads, or an episode of *Planet Earth*. I see most oceans on screens. In digital post-production, campus may have found another variable that obstructs us from grasping what's before our eyes. To see outside yourself is the longest journey of all.

peter campus: video ergo sum is on view at the Bronx Museum of the Arts through July 21. The exhibition was curated by Anne-Marie Duguet, and organized by Jeu de Paume, Paris, with the participation of The Bronx Museum of the Arts.