

ARTIST TO ARTIST

PETER CAMPUS—IMAGE AND SELF

The artist Bill Viola brings his knowledge of digital technology and Buddhism to this appreciation of the work of Peter Campus.

BY BILL VIOLA

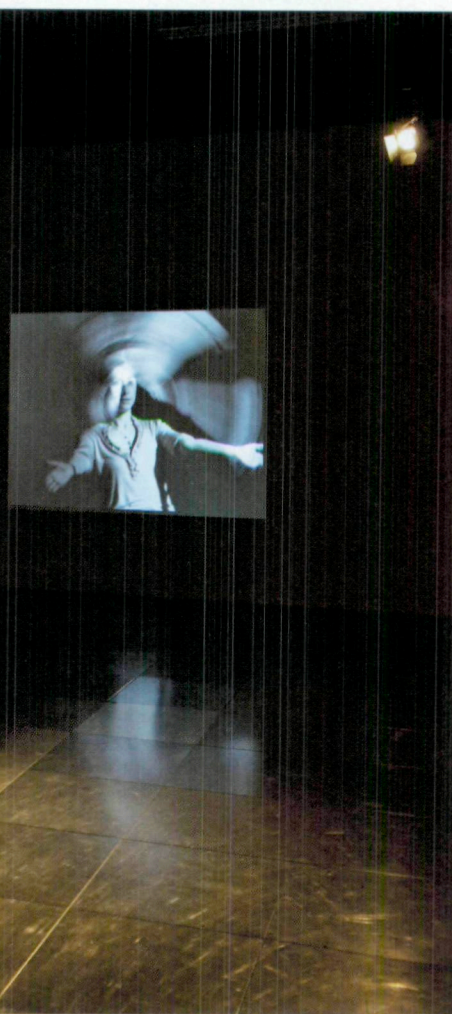
When I was young I made myself a prisoner of my room. It became part of me, an extension of my being. I thought of the walls as my shell. The room as a container had some relationship to the imaginary space inside a monitor . . .

—Peter Campus, conversation with Barbara Nierhoff, 2003¹

WARREN S. MCCULLOCH, a scientist, physician, philosopher and poet, was one of the 20th century's greatest and most versatile minds. In 1952, after 12 years of research in psychiatry and neurology, McCulloch turned his formidable skills to problems of neurophysiology, mathematics, cybernetics and the mechanics of logic, joining the Research Laboratory of Electronics at M.I.T. He became a key person in the new field of cybernetics—the study of complex systems, especially communication systems, in living organisms and technology. At M.I.T., along with his team of J. Letvin, W. Pitts and H. Maturana, he studied the visual system of the frog and discovered that the eye has an active role in organizing and interpreting visual information before it is sent to the brain: in short, that knowledge is a part of perception. Their groundbreaking paper was titled "What the Frog's Eye Tells the Frog's Brain," and it was published in 1959.

In 1959, Peter Campus was 22 years old, studying experimental psychology at Ohio State University. The attempt to create perceptual and cognitive models of the human central nervous system using the new technologies of

analog electronics was at the cutting edge of the field. Television was barely 20 years old. There were three nationwide channels, broadcasting almost entirely in black and white, videotape recorders were the size of refrigerators, and "video," the portable camera and recorder, was nonexistent. Fortuitously, Campus became interested in film and, after studying at City College Film Institute in New York for several years, he worked in the film industry

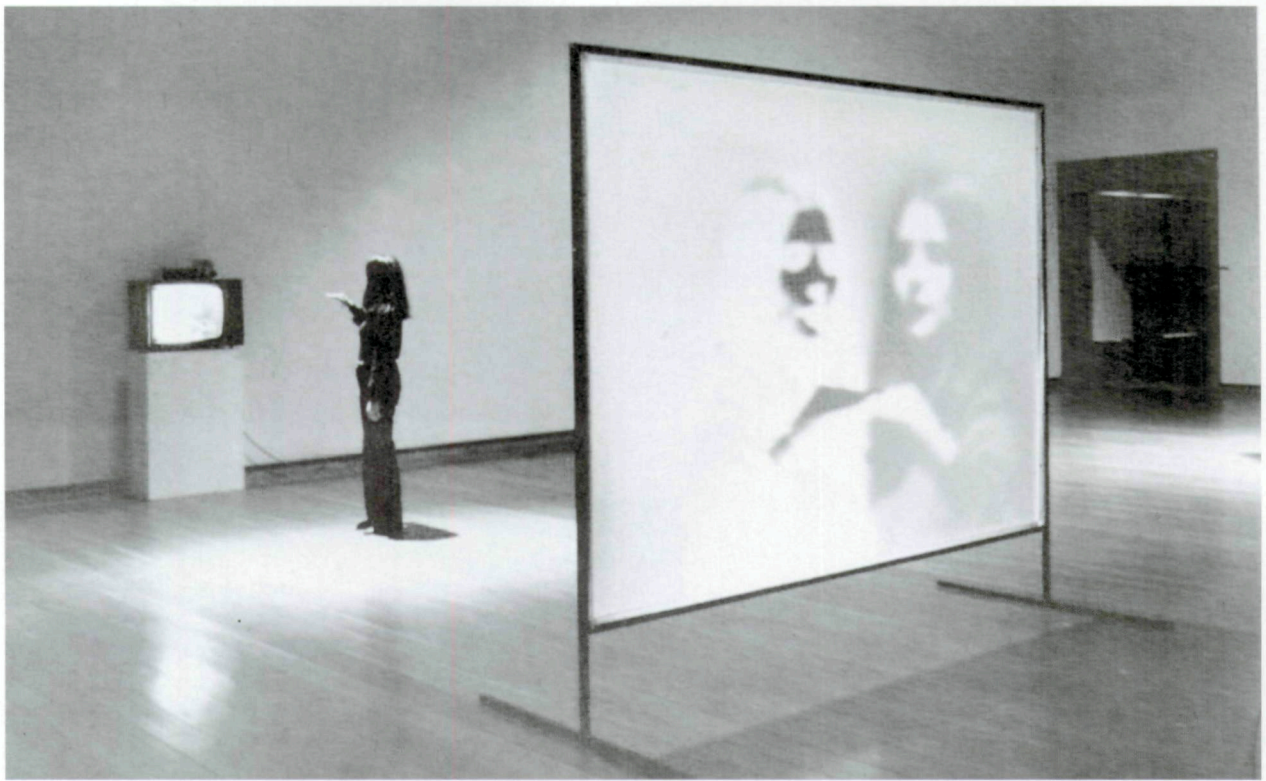


View of Peter Campus's *Stasis*, 1973, two closed-circuit video cameras (one static, one rotating with prisms), projector, screen; at the British Film Institute, London, 2009. Photo Dave Morgan.

as a production manager and then as an editor—his professional introduction to the time-based image. Starting in the late '60s he made a series of documentary films for the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York for exhibitions on subjects such as Chinese

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

"Peter Campus: Opticks"
at London's BFI Southbank Gallery
through Feb. 14.



Negative Crossing, 1974, video camera, projector, negative image device and screen. Photos this spread at the Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, N.Y., 1974.

pottery and Chartres Cathedral, and began meeting contemporary artists and seeing their work at local galleries and museums, including the work of Bruce Nauman, who had already started to use video.

All of these streams came together when Campus first used the new black-and-white portable video equipment in his studio in 1971. He made two seminal works, *Dynamic Field Series* and *Double Vision*. Evocative, disorienting, revelatory and at times inscrutable, these two works laid the foundation for the scope of his investigations into the phenomena of human existence and questions of identity and the nature of the Self, which would occupy him for years to come. In the tapes, like a scientist conducting a controlled experiment, Campus methodically, almost clinically, dissects the nature of visual perception before our eyes. But unlike a scientist, he uses himself as the subject and, most significantly, he extends this subjectivity to the camera itself. Unlike many of his contemporaries who used the surveillance camera as a detached, fixed observer documenting the performer's actions, Campus assigned an active, independent ontological status to the camera eye. It variously takes on the position of the artist himself, his reflection, an outside observer, a mental self-image, a double, an unknown protagonist, the room,

an eye, a hand, an animal, an insect's visual system. However, like a mirror of many facets all converging inward, the works keep returning to Campus himself and ultimately become a portrait of the Self searching for the ground of Being, peeling back layer upon layer of reality in the process.

IMAGE

If we are to avoid the problem of creating a visual system that will reduce the capacity of the eye, it is necessary to disassociate the video camera from the eye and make it an extension of the room.

—Peter Campus
Video as a Function of Reality, 1974

Visionary ecstasy is the experiencing of an image that takes over the body of the seer.

—Victor Stoichita

The images we create could turn into wild beasts and tear us to pieces.

—Rumi

Sudhana said, "Where has that magnificent display gone?"

Maitreya said, "Where it came from."

—Avatamsaka Sutra

THE SO-CALLED VIDEO image is actually a shimmering energy pattern of electrons vibrating in time. The fabric of the image needs to

be in a constant state of motion in order to exist, a modern embodiment of Buddha's dictum that "all existence is change." The electronic image is not fixed to any material base and, like our DNA, it has become a code that can circulate freely to any container that will hold it, defying death as it travels at the speed of light. But perhaps the most extraordinary aspect of the medium is that the image is live. Video is the first artificially created image since the camera obscura from the ancient world to exist as a moving image simultaneous with experience. This fact so radically altered our experience of time and space in the second half of the 20th century that a new term for time was coined to describe it. "Real time" refers to an image existing in the present tense, parallel with unfolding experience, and it is distinct from "recorded time," "past time," "delayed time," "slowed time" and other forms of time that were starting to accumulate in the media landscape.

Artists were captivated by a moving image that reflected living reality at the moment it was occurring,

VIDEO IS THE FIRST ARTIFICIALLY CREATED IMAGE SINCE THE CAMERA OBSCURA TO EXIST AS A MOVING IMAGE SIMULTANEOUS WITH EXPERIENCE.

an unprecedented development in the history of art. With a live camera, they could witness themselves engaged in the act of creation and use the external point of view of a monitor to reference what they were doing from multiple points of view. Video in the late 20th century realized the dream of painters from the Renaissance to the late 19th century: to embody motion. "Right now there is a moment of time passing by—we must *become* that moment!" Cézanne once proclaimed. Not only could artists now capture the cresting wave of the moment, but they could observe themselves in the midst of it from a point of view outside their bodies.

Video literally evokes the third person. Co-existing with one's own self-image is an inherently paradoxical, tautological situation. Up to this point it had only been a philosophical conundrum described in literature, but now, with the advent of the live camera, it was given palpable form. Through the new technology, Campus was able to experience himself from outside himself—to objectify his subjectivity and to directly engage his Double, and it is here that his studies in psychology, filmmaking and visual art, along with an obsessive, uncompromising focus on the identity of his inner Self, all converge.

SPACE

In a closed-circuit video situation one is no longer dealing with images of a temporarily finite nature. The duration of the image becomes a property of the room.

—Peter Campus,
Video as a Function of Reality, 1974

The Self shines in space through knowing.

—*The Upanishads*

Reality is perceived through your own body.

—Vimalakirti Sutra

It takes a man to make a room silent.

—Thoreau



Shadow Projection, 1974, video camera, projector, screen and light.

IN HIS LIVE VIDEO projection installations of the 1970s, Peter Campus blazed a trail into the depths of the living moment few have followed. Using contemporary technology, he opened the door onto one of the most ancient and profound revelations: that the central core of my living being, my aliveness, is the same essence present within all people, and furthermore that this essence extends beyond the human family and lies embedded in the foundations of nature. Formulated by Hindu sages in preliterate times and recorded in a collection of texts called *The Upanishads*, this connection of Sentience and Self between people, and in turn between human beings and the natural world, is one of the defining legacies of the human race. Its living presence is also felt in Campus's live camera pieces.

Encountering one of these pieces in person is a haunting, unforgettable experience. The room is dark and its dimensions unclear. A glowing pale blue rectangle of light illuminates one wall. As you approach, the rectangle suddenly comes alive with a disorienting burst of light, movement and shadow. Quickly you realize that you are seeing your own image projected live on the wall in black and white. You look at yourself as if seeing a ghost. The pale, fragile quality of the light and tenuous consistency of the image speak of impermanence. Then, as in most unexpected encounters with your own likeness, you discover that you are not what you seem to be.

THE CAMERA MADE NO VALUE JUDGMENTS, OVERLOOKED NO DETAIL, HARBORED NO HIDDEN AGENDA, NEVER BECAME IMPATIENT OR TIRED. IT SAW ALL AS EQUAL, AND REMAINED PERFECTLY IMPARTIAL AND UNMOVED BY WHAT WAS SEEN.

REFLECTION

I re-enter the field. My image and I stand perpendicular to each other. The image is alive. The equation between matter and light energy formed. Photons of light penetrate the wall. I feel the emptiness around me. I let myself go into this extension of self. For a brief moment I am at the same time this image and this self.

—Peter Campus, *sev*, 1975

When the identity is realized, I as a swordsman see no opponent confronting me and threatening to strike me. I seem to transform myself into the opponent, and every movement he makes, as well as every thought he conceives, are felt as if they were all my own . . .

—Takano Shigeoshi

Recognize what is in your sight and what is hidden will become clear to you.

—Jesus (Gospel of Thomas)

IN HIS INSTALLATIONS, Campus has distilled the fundamental equation of art, the one-on-one encounter between an observer and an image, down to its bare essentials. In his darkened rooms, the anonymous observer becomes both subject and object at the same time. Campus has somehow found the link between the infinite expanse of time that surrounds us and the essential loneliness of the inner Self. The luminous, temporary, fragile and unforgettable images in Campus's dark spaces conjure the three great arcs of humanity: the Unborn, the Living and the Dead (Potentiality, Finality and Eternity). Of these, two are infinite and only one, our living self, is limited and finite.

Campus's live video projection spaces work best when the viewer/participant is either alone in the room or at least alone on the screen. They are, after all, based on solitary encounters—experiences in life that occur outside of the social web. With video, Campus was given a way to experience himself from outside himself. The journey he

embarked on was one of increasing inwardness, and he progressively removed perceived obstacles to the clarity he was seeking. The process of culling any elements deemed unnecessary began as a simplification of the spaces he was recording for his videotape pieces. It soon led to the video technology itself. The transition from the CRT (cathode ray tube) monitor to video projection allowed Campus to abandon the physicality of the box and create an image that consisted of light alone. This in turn defined the image as independent of a physical screen, and enabled him to create images of almost any size and shape. Projecting directly onto the wall also made the image part of the space and architecture, evoking memories of 14th-century fresco painting where the painted image was directly applied into the wet plaster of the wall, becoming indistinguishable from the wall surface. Soon, there wasn't much left in the room except the empty space, a video projector and a shaft of light.

Finally, Campus zeroed in on the self-referential character of video and pushed it one important step further: he took the process of recording what the camera was seeing out of the equation. What remained was the absence of memory—pure, unencumbered awareness—the representation of a state of being considered by Buddhist and Hindu masters to be the highest form of existence an individual can achieve. Then, using an artificial instrument, the live camera, as an aid or surrogate for perception, Campus simply handed this gift to anyone who came into the room and stepped into the gaze of the camera. In return, the camera made no value judgments, overlooked no detail, harbored no hidden agenda, never became impatient or tired. It saw all as equal, and remained perfectly impartial and unmoved by what was seen.

However, for human beings, the raw truth in any form can be uncomfortable and even unpleasant, and Campus's live projection pieces could be quite disturbing and unsettling for some. At first the

glowing black-and-white image may seem the furthest from an accurate representation, but once it is experienced firsthand, its visceral, existential truths become self-evident. Campus's work is one of the most accurate and extraordinary representations of sentience ever made by an artist. Its transparency to time establishes that what we are seeing is not a self-portrait or a physical rendering, but rather what artists in Late Antiquity would have called a *vera ikon*, a "true image." The Eastern Orthodox icon familiar to us today is neither a realistic likeness nor a symbolic representation. It is an image that exists outside of time and space, faithful to invisible, intangible prototypes that reside closer to the human heart, nearer the core of our beings, and not on the body's external visible surface.

DEATH

I think of the blackness in the way I use it as a difference between void and non-void. It's basically my understanding that we are temporally just a flash of light in the void.

—Peter Campus in conversation with Marjory Supovitz, 1976

All creative acts are a kind of dying.

—A.K. Coomaraswamy

If you see death in everyday life it will give a foundation to your practice.

—Gyalsay Rinpoche

The pain will be born from that look cast inside yourself, and this pain will make you go beyond the veil.

—Rumi

THE JAPANESE HAIKU poet Masami Kato wrote this poem shortly before he died in 1825:

The surface
of the water
mirrors many things.

It is from a long tradition of *jise*—poems written by Zen monks and

poets on the verge of death. Here is another, written by Zen Master Taigen Sofu, who died in 1555:

I raise the mirror of my life
Up to my face: sixty years.
With a swing I smash the reflection—
The world as usual,
All in its place.

These death poems, some written literally on the cusp of the writer's last breath, often have to do with reflection—the delicate state of being that emerges near the end of life which allows one to see the past as an infinite cascading reflection of the Self, but does not reveal the nature of existence beyond the mirror.

Peter Campus has been stepping outside of himself for much of his life. More than most, he has accrued personal knowledge about some of what lies behind the veil, beyond the everyday world of duration, materiality and reflection. It is a constant presence in his work, sensed but not seen—latent just beneath the surface in the same way a massive rock lying under the rushing water is revealed by disturbances at the surface. Campus himself faced death. In 2000 he went through several months of radiation treatment after being diagnosed with cancer. He created a three-part video piece about this harrowing experience called *Death Threat*, a powerful work about the images *behind* the images of life. It is his visual death poem, but thankfully, without the death.

At the moment I feel odd writing this, and strain to get past the critical distance that texts like this induce, particularly when it

concerns someone I know and care about. Art history, generally speaking, is not written by people who make art. Unlike that of critics, scholars or curators, the artist's journey is not a quest for masterpieces, historical events or definitive works. It is a quest for the authentic and the true in life, not art. This journey takes many paths through an infinite landscape. No two ever are the same, and not one is ever straightforward. For an artist, the path is always more significant and vital than the destination. Arriving somewhere is simply the first step toward going somewhere else. More often than not, this journey, with its twists and turns, is difficult and painful. Occasionally, it is fatal, as the many personal tragedies that lie along the way attest. Failures can at times be more fruitful than successes, and often the struggle endured becomes the grist for the work, the energy source required for a breakthrough.

However, constant confrontation with the Self can take its toll, and in 1979, the year after he made his last video piece for what was to be 17 years, Peter Campus submerged into his "dark age." "By 1979 my work was severe, high contrast black and white. At that point I had to get out. My studio was oppressive," he told Barbara Nierhoff in 2003. That work is titled *Head of a Man with Death on His Mind*, and it is a large projected image showing a close-up of the face of a man in black and white, backlit by over-saturated white light. He stares intensely at the camera—that is, the viewer—for 12 minutes, keeping the nature of his suffering, suggested by the title, to himself.

SELF

one day i was walking by a playing field, fenced off. a ball came over the fence to where i was standing. i picked up the ball to throw it back. at that moment, the moment of the throw, i had a revelation: the important thing is the throw, the body and mind and spirit all come together in an activity. i had the ball in my hand and started to throw. then i saw myself in the act of throwing, the beauty and complexity of the physical act of the moment. it was all there. most of my video work has come from this moment.

—Peter Campus, *musings*,
9 June 2003

The way the Self arrays itself is the form of the entire world.

—Zen Master Dogen

The body is the soul as perceived by the five senses.

—William Blake

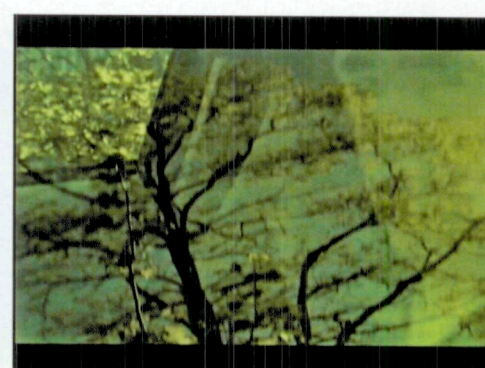
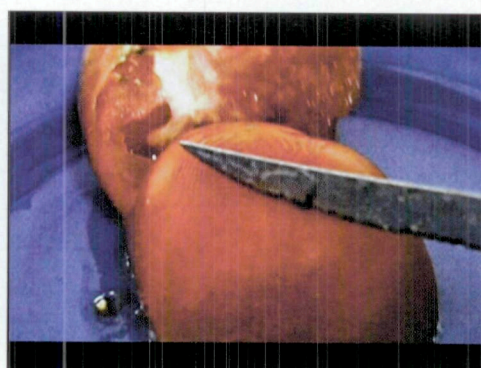
What comes from brightness, I strike with brightness. What comes from darkness, I strike with darkness.

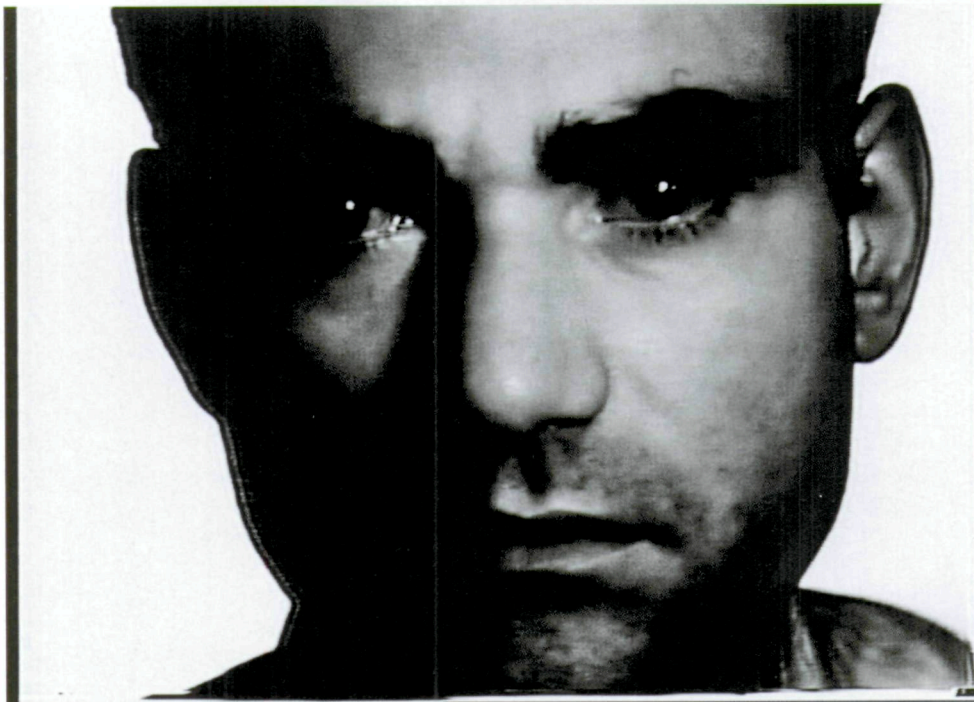
—Fuke

LIKE HIS PROJECTED image on the video screen, Peter Campus is a product of darkness and light. He has inscribed an enigmatic, wandering line on life's path, with sudden turns, switchbacks and breaks—at times illuminating, at times obscuring, his real identity and true intentions, keeping secrets known only to himself. In preparing this text, I wrote down some of the words that come to mind when I remember my time watching Peter Campus work:

Absorbed. Focused.
Purposeful. Intense.
Meticulous. Uncompromising.
Acute. Aware. Sensitive.
Hidden. Vulnerable. Wounded.

Stills from *Death Threat*, 2000, three-channel digital video, approx. 10 minutes.





Head of a Man with Death on His Mind, 1977, video transferred to DVD, 12-minute loop.

Just out of art school, I became his assistant for the installation of his first one-person museum exhibition at the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, N.Y., curated by David Ross in 1974. He showed seven of his seminal room installations: *Anamnesis*, *Negative Crossing*, *Kiva*, *Shadow Projection*, *Interface*, *Optical Sockets* and *Stasis*.

For a young artist it was a privileged opportunity to be setting up those pieces, working side by side with the master—an apprenticeship and education all in one. This, along with the installation of Nam June Paik's first museum exhibition there that same year, became my initiation and grounding in the field of video art, and my foundation for years to come. After those experiences, I became convinced of the necessity of the direct transmission of knowledge, in person, from master to pupil—through action not words.

One event stands out in my mind during the days and weeks of installing the Everson exhibition: the time I almost electrocuted Peter Campus. We were working late into the night wiring up the four-monitor work *Optical Sockets*. Everyone else had gone home, and

1 The source for quotes from Peter Campus is the essential exhibition catalogue *Peter Campus: Analog + Digital, Video + Foto, 1970-2003*, edited by Wulf Herzogenrath and Barbara Nierhoff, Kunsthalle Bremen, 2003, with the exception of the cited interview with Marjory Supovitz, which appeared in a flyer accompanying the exhibition "Peter Campus: Mask Projections," at MIT's Hayden Gallery in 1976. See also Warren S. McCulloch, *Embodiments of Mind*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT, 1970 (first published 1965).

he and I, exhausted, were sitting on the floor testing the electrical cables. We worked in silence for long periods of time, trying to stay awake and focused. When I had tested my final connection, I inserted the wire into the wall plug. I heard a dazed, quiet murmur from Peter, "Bill?," and looked up to see him holding the bare leads of the same live wire, about to attach it to the plug. "Stop!" I screamed, and yanked the live wire out of the wall

socket before he could touch it. Nervous laughter followed, and we both woke up.

I am happy I didn't go down in history as the artist who electrocuted Peter Campus. The field of video art, and art in general, would be a poorer, less interesting place without his extraordinary body of work. I thought later about the occupational hazards for working artists. The danger has always been there—electrocution for a 20th-century video artist, or falling off a scaffold for a 14th-century fresco painter. However, the inner risks to the Self and psyche that the best artists face every time they make work are much harder to quantify and to judge with dubious terms like "good" or "bad," "success" or "failure." This is the inner dimension of art, far beyond the reach of critics and curators.

It is the path of practice, of doing, of riding the crest of the wave of the moment with no thought as to where it will land, or whether there are rocks just below the surface, or if the Self will survive the fall. This constant falling, the incessant quest for some unknown thing beneath, beyond, or just out of reach has possessed Peter Campus his whole life and, like many artists, at certain times has pushed him to the edge. This, more than anything specific about his works, is what he imparted to me and, I imagine, to all the students close to him. I know that I am a better artist because of his gifts. ○

... This is the magic of the printed page,
Of canvases that glow with subtle
feeling ...

... Some man in silence's cloud
On Lethe's shore, with all his art
appealing,

Into your lonely heart would cry aloud
The rich notes of his love, rending
Death's shroud.

—Warren McCulloch, *The Natural Fit*

I have propelled myself forward through
forgetfulness. I lose memory of past, past
art, my past art, myself. I can think of
myself more alive if I don't know what has
come before this moment, if I don't see my
reflection when looking out the window.

—Peter Campus, *musings*,
9 June 2003