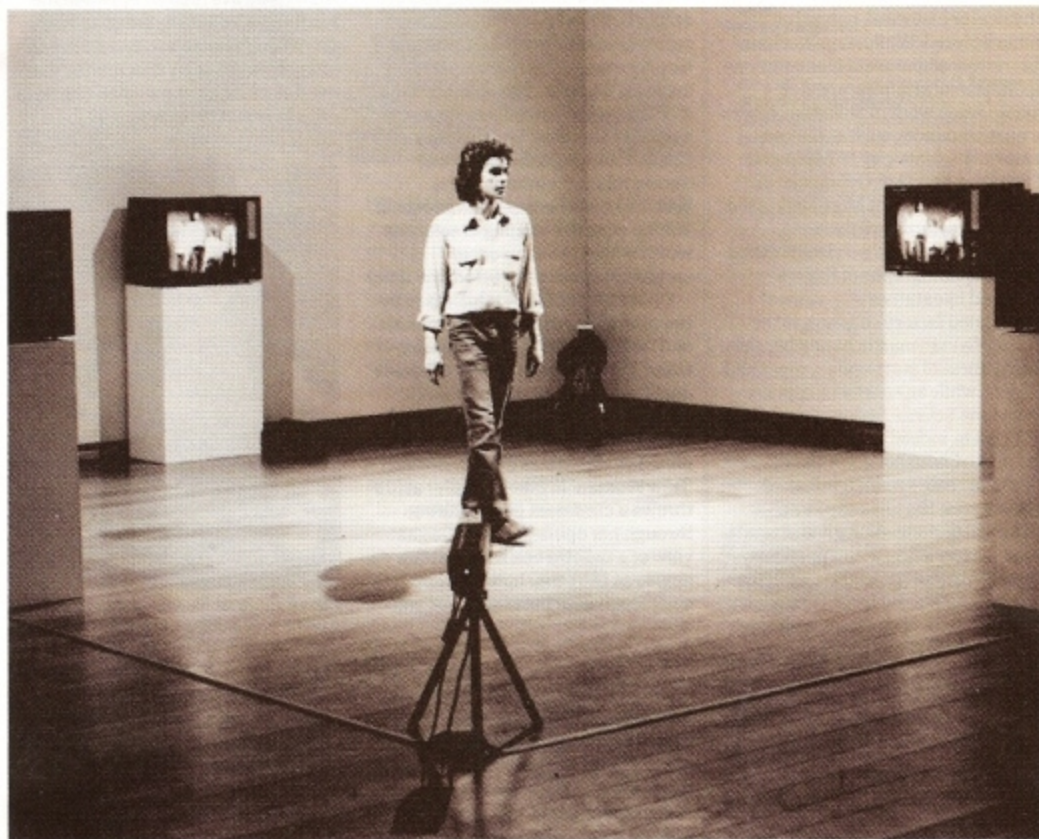


Smile, you're on Campus camera



Cornered Peter Campus wanders through his original 'Optical Sockets' installation of 1973

Ossian Ward discovers 'the screen is like a sedative' when he meets unsung video art pioneer Peter Campus

Great art has the power to move, but some works can literally throw you off balance. Four classic but simple pieces of early video art by Peter Campus do just that; his closed-circuit camera installations include slowly rotating projections, numerous overlapping reflections and banks of video monitors, all of which repeat your own image many times over and have the disquieting power of a fairground ride or hall of mirrors. This kaleidoscopic experience of being watched by many mechanical eyes is like finding yourself at the centre of a sinister surveillance operation with no one at the controls, or as Campus puts it, 'I was interested in how a room might see us.'

Despite the predominance of the moving image and the cinema throughout the twentieth century, it wasn't until the late '60s that artists began manipulating film as a medium

in its own right. Campus was among the first generation of video artists to harness this technology alongside Bruce Nauman, Dan Graham and Nam June Paik, yet he's one of the least-known pioneers in his field and has never shown in the UK, let alone been convinced to drag his early observational experiments out of their permanent state of storage, now mainly in his head or documented in grainy old photos.

'I'd been working in film and television for over a decade so it wasn't new to me,' says the wirily and white-haired Campus, now 70, of his place in the hierarchy of radical video's heyday. 'Television had very definite rules – how you should change the image every eight seconds being one of them – but all of a sudden we saw raw video footage beamed from the Apollo moon landings and I liked it a lot better. It was more direct and truthful.'

This led Campus to think about who was or wasn't behind the camera and what on earth weightlessness would be like: 'I also tried to incorporate some otherworldly aspects relating to the

idea of a second, hidden self, or a doppelgänger.' It helped that he had been a student of cognitive psychology at university and so utilised video as a way of turning the focus back on to viewers' behavioural patterns rather than just what they look like when mugging for the camera.

All of a sudden, Campus stopped making video art in 1979, despite continuing to teach the subject at NYU, where he's been an associate professor for 25 years. 'I had the mistaken premise that what I wanted was to slow down time. So the logical step was to stop time entirely by moving away from film and into photography. It was only 17 years later I realised that wasn't right; what I'm interested in is duration and stasis.' His video wilderness years weren't wasted however, because not only did he rediscover his love of the real wilderness (through landscape photography), but there's an unusual photographic stillness to the new short films, captured near his upstate New York home last year. These five flatscreen works show unflinching fixed-positional shots of the Long Island

Sound, a radio tower or a bridge, with only sparing movement taking place within the confines of his tight crops. A bird bullets past, a jet-ski briefly swirls into view or else a truck trundles past noisily. Otherwise, very little happens in these painterly spaces, as though the artist had sat outdoors waiting patiently for the right cloud to drift along. Campus has spent his life persistently looking, something we don't do very much of nowadays when there's always something shiny and new at every turn.

'The screen is like a sedative, it quietsens the eye and brain waves down,' explains Campus, who seems to be willing the world to decelerate in these landscapes, suggesting a serious alternative to the mood-enhancing qualities of those once-fashionable DVDs of open fires or fish tank screensavers. 'But I'm no longer trying to control people with these,' he adds, realising that some viewers won't stay for the whole six-minute loop. 'There's a seduction game in the media to capture audiences with big projections or glossy production values. I'm always more interested in engaging the mind than engaging the eye.'

He's still much more extreme than the dotting impressionist these new works portray him to be. 'Someone asked me, "How can you do landscapes in video?" as though they should be in watercolour,' he marvels. Instead, they're all filmed in high definition and surround sound. Neither is Campus precious about his old works being

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restored to their low-tech origins. It's the similarity between how the closed-circuit video system and our eyes transmit what's in front of them – turning images upside down and assembling them into vision on the screen or in the brain – which really interests him, not the retro feel: 'I just want the pieces to be living'. Peter Campus shows at Albion from Thursday (see Chelsea to Westbourne Park for details).

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