

Peter Campus

Leslie Tonkonow, New York, USA

BY JAMES TRAINOR



Peter Campus, a pioneer in the development of video, has said that his 'Eureka' moment came while watching the first Apollo moon landing in 1969. From a beach cottage in New England the artist experienced the dislocation generated by simultaneously witnessing the familiar sun-dappled ocean scene before him and the other-worldly event unfolding in black and white on his TV. Both were undeniably real, both were occurring at the same moment, yet each appeared to negate the primacy or plausibility of the other.

In an age when most people who live in big cities can expect to be photographed, monitored or videotaped hundreds of times a day, it is hard to imagine a time when video was new. Because it is not just a medium of recording, but can also feed a stream of live images of anything to anywhere, video not only radically changed the average person's self image, but also altered forever our collective perception of time, duration and the idea of a fixed perspective.

Inspired by Bruce Nauman and others, Campus experimented with video in the early 1970s, initially with camera obscura-like installations that demanded the perambulating presence of the viewer. At the same time he made projections addressing video as a kind of displaced mirror, and using himself as test subject. This show provided a mini-overview of these early works, as well as examples of his later Polaroids - a static medium as close to the 'live' reflectivity of video as still photography can get - and recent video works made with the latest digital tools.

Three Transitions (1973) demonstrated Campus' talents as a sort of video Houdini who, while executing various subdued performative tasks and supervising his actions via an off-camera monitor, is intent on exposing the perceptual assumptions that allow the spectator to be fooled. In short episodic clips he made ample use of the blue screen process, a technological breakthrough allowing one live image to be inserted into the background or foreground of another. The technique became ubiquitous to the point of invisibility in television production, but in the early 1970s it was still new, and Campus exploited it to examine the mechanisms by which points of view are constructed.

His first 'transition' showed the artist approach a large paper screen, his back to the camera, and carefully make an incision in its surface. The gash immediately appears to rip open the rear of his corduroy sports jacket, from which protrude Campus' tearing fingers. In a flash the viewer realizes that the artist is actually standing on the far side of the partition, the near side acting as blue screen, and that two cameras on either side are recording and combining both images in real time. In another projection, *Four Sided Tape* (1976), a man's torso is methodically deconstructed by hands emerging from behind the screen on to which the image is projected. Even simpler is *Third Tape* (1976), in which a jumble of mirrored tiles is slowly placed on a table-top, the random heap reflecting a fragmentary portrait of the face of the person performing the act, one that is continually in flux.

This fragile construction and annihilation of images as a metaphor for the tenuous construction of self are a constant in Campus' work - hence all the destroyed paper screens (he burns one of them in another video), layered images, mirror shards and ephemeral reflections. Campus intentionally never used video cameras with viewfinders, but relied instead on the monitor as a surrogate eye, disrupting the notion that the lens represents the privileged vantage point of the self. Despite Rosalind Krauss' claims concerning the

intrinsic 'narcissism of video', this scattering of perspective implies a lack of centrality for both artist and observer.

The strain of melancholic self-reflection in Campus' projections also permeates his high contrast, black-and-white Polaroid portraits from the late 1970s and 1980s, made during a 17-year hiatus from video. Again he used the idea of instantaneous photographic feedback as a reflective surface, and the portraits evolved through a process of collaboration with each sitter. Typically, he would take an initial photograph and show it to his subject, whose emotional response to the image would register and gradually alter the appearance of each successive shot.

On viewing the new DVDs made since his return to video in the late 1990s, one's first inclination is to think that Campus has gone all soft and sweet. Presented on small flat screens, his digitally edited loops are beautiful in a way that his early work never was. Assembled using crisply phrased and montaged clips

- a muddy path in the woods, a gardener pulling weeds, an index finger tracing the path of an electrical cord - they exude enough lyricism to make one downright suspicious. But repeated viewings of the lushly hypnotic works begin to erode such wariness, and what remains is a more finely gradated and personal elaboration on Campus' doubt about the stability of images and identities.

In *Divide* (2001), a humming-bird fluttering in slow motion over a blood-red feeder is spliced together with an image of the empty corner of a room. The marriage of the two apparently unrelated realities eventually proves too fragile to be sustained, and the bird's image is wiped away like chalk from a blackboard, leaving only a dead, sun-bleached interior. To some degree there has always been both a terror and acceptance of the transitory nature of vision in Campus' work, which may simply be growing more richly dream-like as his images come closer to home.