

TRUE LIES or THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING COLIN

Immediately after I learned of Colin Campbell's death, I went shopping. October 31, 2001 was my last day in Canada before leaving for Argentina for ten days. My partner's birthday would occur while I was away: I needed to buy him a birthday present before he came home from work that night. So there I was, walking to a bookstore, sobbing to myself. And I thought, "This is a very Colin Campbell moment." I could hear his deep and pause-inflected voice slowly saying, "After I heard about Colin's death, I went shopping." And this made me laugh, and then it made me cry, because what Colin gave us is the ability to detect 'Colin Campbell moments': these times when the serious events of life become burdened by the spectre of the ridiculous. Irony erupts, even when we do not want it to. Comedy and tragedy walk hand in hand. It's a paradox that life accomodates well, but that the artists and writers would rather avoid. It's not unusual to have our sublime experiences of self-importance short-circuited by the ridiculous. This is something that Colin showed us. And now he is gone.

"I never try to distinguish between acting and not acting.
They are the same to me."

Colin Campbell "Video By
Artists" (Art Metropole, 1976)

Part of the first generation of Canadian artists to work with video, Colin Campbell is widely regarded as an important pioneer of the medium. He authored over 50 videotapes from 1972 onwards: many are regarded as classics. Campbell's earliest works were informed by conceptualist and body art practices of the early seventies. Unedited performances for the camera, recorded in black and white on half-inch open reel, paralleled the work of American artists such as Vito Acconci, Dennis Oppenheim and others. As the decade wore on, Campbell's became interested in exploring narrative. Performing in drag for the camera, Campbell's works were anecdotal and ironic, witty and urbane. Throughout the eighties and nineties, Campbell's video work became more dramatic, echoing in the formal and narrative codes of independent cinema and television, but with an open-ended-ness that relentlessly avoided narrative closure and fixity. This quality is one which unites all of his work: we find in his earliest tapes, as well as in those produced prior to his death.

As a university professor, I have had to confront artists' work in an unusual way. I need to find points of entry that allow my students to engage with an artist and his or her practice; to find a way to guide them in. This has been a challenge with Colin Campbell's videotapes, because Colin worked hard to create a sense of openness in his work that can often be baffling for newcomers. The best entry point I have found is through the performance of Campbell himself. If you miss this, you miss the work: the videos give up none of their secrets.

This is a simple and obvious truth, but it is one that has been seldom uttered. Perhaps it's because we assume it should be obvious, when often it is not. The performance is something we overlook in our rush to get to the narrative. 'Performance' should not be confused with acting: it is in some ways a site-specific use of the artist's mind and body. Campbell's tapes, like many of the first generation of video artists, hinge on a unique person and their ability to channel personas in an almost mediumistic manner. The performance cannot be separated from the artist.

I first encountered this idea while watching Campbell's one-two punch, "Modern Love" and "Bad Girls". In "Modern Love", Campbell plays Robin, a girl from the suburbs who works as a photocopy clerk at a downtown office. Robin is seduced by the glamour of The Cabana Room, a post-punk nightclub, and a sleazy impresario Lamont Del Lamonte: her aspirations for fame (and love) ultimately lead to disaster. "Bad Girls", the sequel, continues to document Robin's exploits. The tape charts the rise and fall of the band 'Robin and the Robots' -- really, just the duo of Robin and Heide (played by Rodney Werden) -- an electro-pop outfit from 1980 who eerily prefigure 2002's Miss Kittin. Ultimately, Robin the photocopy girl achieves a kind of provisional fame: a celebrity that exists only within the confines of The Cabana Room (this itself reading like a mildly cynical parable about the Toronto arts scene, and by extension, Canada's).

Much of the charm of "Modern Love" and "Bad Girls" is linked to context in which the works were produced. They sparkle with wit, invention and gutter elegance.

"Those were all ad lib performances where there was no script. There would be a very quick improvised kind of story board or outline about what was going to happen but then it was just a free for all in terms of what people might say or do." (Colin Campbell in interview with Sue Ditta)

The tapes were recorded in piece-meal fashion. Short episodes were presented at the real Cabana Room on a weekly basis. The versions we have today are compilations of the short weekly installments.

As I watched "Modern Love" and "Bad Girls", I found myself imagining a feature length film based on these tapes. But the core of these works -- what makes them special -- is not the words, but Campbell's performance. Robin is utterly adorable. She is an eternal wide-eyed innocent: earnestly ambitious, morally pure yet open to temptation, sensible yet easily fooled. We can't separate Campbell from these works: no one else would be capable of embodying Robin. Without him and his performance, these tapes would lose their urgency.

Campbell's work is specific to him as an artist: he is a mediumistic vessel through which the persona of Robin and others (Art Star, The Woman From Malibu and later, Colleen) emerge. If

Campbell then -- his body and mind -- is the ground, then it is the 'persona' that becomes the material (the medium) with which he works. Yet the characters he embodies are not the content of the works (any more that paint or marble can constitute 'content' in a post-modern world). This is why analyses that depict Colin's project solely as a sustained critique of gender do not ring true. Campbell's work is about the relationship between images and what they contain.

We see Campbell using himself as a kind of testing ground: a site for experimentation in which he is able to examine his subject matter. We can think of it as a kind of echo chamber: Campbell feeds his material (the persona of Robin) in to this reverberant room like a vocal sound. What interests him is the echo that is produced; the resonant (or dissonant) effect of a female persona inhabiting a male body. It is this relective echo that becomes the content, a kind of doubling which in Campbell's work I would call "true lies" and "false truths". For Campbell it seems, the lie is inherently more truthful than the truth or rather, we are better at telling the truth when we lie. Or perhaps it is only in doubling -- the paradoxical existence of truth and lies in harmonious proximity -- that we can begin to see the real nature of things.

"...He couldn't be honest or it would be taken too literally." ("Hindsight", a videotape by Colin Campbell, 1975)

Campbell outlines the basis of his project in two of his earliest works: "True/False" (1972) and "Sackville, I'm Yours" (1972). In "True/False", Campbell reads a series of sentences: "I like Sackville...I have false teeth...I have smoked grass..." Structured like a test, each phrase is followed by the words: "True/False". The viewer must make a choice: What is true? What is not? Many of these utterances have the potential to position Campbell in a social margin: "I am part Jewish. True/False. I am seeing a psychiatrist. True/False. I have crabs. True/False. I snort coke." These margins are social, sexual, medical and legal.

The artist reads a total 16 statements twice: first in profile and then facing the camera, making reference to photography's relationship to systems of power that control social subjects (police mug shots, 'scientific' methods of establishing ethnic 'types', etc.) Campbell's performance however, undoes any simple assumptions we can make about identity and essence, and does much to destabilize the authority of the photographic image. He empties himself of his own persona and becomes a screen for a series of projected characteristics that are both true and false: I have/have not collected pornography. I did/did not recently attempt suicide. I am/am not heterosexual. This fluctuation between being/not being captures something of the "truth" of identity; more truthful at least than a simple admission of guilt or an assertion of deviancy.

Often my students read this video as a lie detector test. They try to determine the truth in Colin's statements by "reading" his neutral facial expression. Others attempt to find the truth by gauging the weight he accords to the words "true" or "false" or the length of the pause Colin inserts between them: "I want to be as star. TRUE...[a protracted pause follows that seems to last a minute before Campbell arrives with an authoritative stamp of]...FALSE." Campbell denies (or at least inverts) our expectations of closure, fixity and stability through a provocative doubling of the self.

"I like Sackville...I want to be a star..." These questions from "True/False" lie at the heart of Campbell's classic 1972 work "Sackville, I'm Yours". In this subtly humourous tape, Campbell plays the role of Art Star, a big city artist who is slumming in backwater of Sackville, New Brunswick. Shot in a single continuous take, Art Star responds to an unseen (and unheard) off-screen interviewer. For the full 15-minute length of the tape, Art Star tells us about how famous he is, and how much he loves Sackville. But as the tape wears on, what emerges is the opposite: Art Star dislikes Sackville and is perhaps not quite as stellar as he thinks he his. Art Star is duplicitous: what he says is not always what he means.

Again, I feel that the first level of this work is Campbell's performance: if we miss this, we miss the real content. Art Star is vaguely ironic, slightly cynical, yet warm and ultimately very charismatic (as all stars should be!). If he is filing a grievance about not having a role to play as an artist working in video and performance, it is done with elegance through facetiousness. But Art Star also embodies several resonant dualities that again take us into the realm of double identities: he famous yet obscure, pompous but pathetic, stellar and yet somehow ordinary. These dualities are further compounded by the paradox of the famous Art Star inhabiting the real (and at that time, obscure) Colin Campbell. The theme of being "famous in content" sketched out in "Sackville, I'm Yours" would be extended in "Modern Love" and "Bad Girls". For my purposes, what interests me most about "Sackville, I'm Yours" is how the real narration of this work lies not in the text (what is spoken), but in the subtext (what is understood).

Monique Moulblow organized a show entitled "Lapses, Silences, Awkward Moments" ["Intervalles; Silences, moment de gênes"] at Groupe Intervention Video last year in which she paired the work of Miranda July with Colin Campbell. It was a brilliant and revealing match. Aside from wig play, July and Campbell are both masterful narrators. The literal content of the narration, however, is seldom what is being narrated. My mother once said to me, "If you want to know what people are thinking, listen to what they say." Again, a statement that is so obvious it is laughable. But once you roll it over in your mind, a strange truth emerges. What is the unspoken subtext that lies at the heart of what is

said? If we were to read a transcript of "Sackville, I'm Yours", we would never hear him invert the sense of what he is saying. His embodiment of Art Star however, renders this flexible interval between a white lie and its truth with delicious clarity.

Both "True/False" and "Sackville, I'm Yours", play with surfaces and contents: what appears to be versus what is. But paradox in Campbell's work is not only a question of double identity. It is also a question of the interval between images and their contents. This paradox is in many ways crystallized in two images from "Hollywood and Vine", the final chapter in Campbell's series of six tapes from 1976 and 1977 that emerge from the character of "The Woman from Malibu".

This series is widely regarded as a major breakthrough for Campbell, and the starting point of his mature work. The six episodes -- "The Woman from Malibu", "The Temperature in Lima", "Shango Botanico", "Culver City Limits", "Last Seen Wearing" and "Hollywood and Vine" -- range from ten to 23 minutes in length. In each, Campbell's dons a wig and a set of Ray-Bans and channels the persona of The Woman from Malibu: a middle-aged, middle-class woman from southern California who in many ways comes to be an embodiment of an entire ideological system. She acts out a set of values, morals and ethical positions that seem at once familiar and strangely alien. Based in part on newspaper articles, the text in The Woman from Malibu tapes is tightly scripted. Standing in stark opposition to improvised works such as "Modern Love," the writing in this series is so solid it verges on literary. Writing would become the fundamental basis for most of Campbell's later work.

"It was the first time the work wasn't as autobiographical as it had been. It was like moving out into the world and playing with it. It seemed so much more open-ended and I thought several times -- why didn't I think of this before?"
(Colin Campbell in interview with Sue Ditta)

Campbell's use of drag (as is the case in "Modern Love" and "Bad Girls") is schematic rather than theatrical; provisional rather than spectacular. We are given just enough embellishment to suggest the feminine, but the masculine remains always within reach. Images and their contents: a man in drag, or a woman in a man's body? The problematic relationship of essence to identity is rendered as the problem of images and their contents; signs and meanings.

As I mentioned above, "Hollywood and Vine" is the final episode in The Woman from Malibu series. In this fifteen-minute tape comprised of only three shots, we see Colin slowly become The Woman from Malibu. A precision: Colin is already 'inhabited' by the persona of The Woman from Malibu when we first see him, but he is not wearing her accoutrements (the obligatory wig, Ray Bans and scarf). She begins: "I almost ran over Liza Minnelli. I had

just got back from Culver City. I had been to the funeral of an old friend who had been fumigated to death, accidentally..." As he continues his monologue, he slowly changes his physical appearance in order to harmonize with this interior presence. This image of appearance is later followed by a disappearance: it is interesting to compare them.

"Hollywood and Vine" ends famously with The Woman from Malibu walking off into the Mojave Desert in search of pony skeletons, disappearing into the landscape (an inversion of Bill Viola's appearance at the beginning of "Chott el-Djerid"). We slowly watch her walk away from the camera, progressively growing smaller until she finally vanishes from sight. (Remember the old superstition, "Never watch someone out of sight," as this would mean their death: vision has deadly power.) We are left staring at the 'empty' landscape for a solid two minutes.

In these two images, Campbell is concerned with another kind of resonance: an effect of the paradoxical relationship between an image and its contents. In the first, Campbell slowly transforms himself into The Woman from Malibu. As she appears, he disappears. She becomes charged with his invisible (masculine) presence, as he is overwhelmed by the feminine. In the second image, The Woman from Malibu is overwhelmed by the landscape, and it too is charged with her invisible presence. But this charged landscape is not an image of life, hope or fullness. Instead, we are left with an overwhelming sense of death.

In each case, it seems that Campbell is fascinated by the effects of a paradoxical doubling: the masculine/feminine person, the empty/full landscape. Each paradox distresses the seeming solidity of an otherwise stable surface, and provokes a new meaning. Presence and absence are coiled together, creating a whole that is bigger than both.

"And she was always critical of how I looked and dressed. 'Gawd, Colleena,' she'd say, 'do you have to look so butch?' Moi? Frankly (and I've never told anyone this) I always thought she looked like she was in drag. That tacky bleached blonde hairdo with those fake Ray-Ban sunglasses. The worst!"

Colleena on Mildred (a.k.a. Mildred The Woman From Malibu) in "Rendez-vous", 1997.

I would guess that as Colin moved further and further away from his primary medium (the relationship between images and their contents), video became less interesting to him as a practice. The eighties saw many artists working with an industrial model of video production that mimicked the structures of film and television. Campbell himself was influenced by Fassbinder (this would be a good topic for future researchers), and as his work moved into a dramatic phase, his role shifted from performer to writer. This is not to diminish Campbell's output of the

eighties. Far from it. "The Woman Who Went Too Far", "No Voice Over" and other works from this period have stood up well over time, largely due to the quality of the writing and his deft selection of actors. That said, Campbell himself remarked that he became tired of "worrying about the caterers" and one suspects that an overall fatigue with industry-styled production was one factor that led to his seven year hiatus.

Campbell's return to video in 1997 represents a synthesis of his performative works of the seventies and the dramatic techniques of the eighties. Colin once again performs in his work, only on-location in exotic locales such as France and Italy. For this reason, videos such as "Rendez-vous" and "Déjà Vu" echo "No Voice Over", at least in stylistic terms. Colin's new persona is Colleena, an aging performance artist manqué living luxuriously in Europe on money that seems to have come from questionable sources. Colleena, it turns out, is one of three sisters: Robin and The Woman from Malibu are the others. Taking this as a point of departure, Campbell's builds upon (and disassembles) his own iconography in a manner that is drole, irreverent, and breathtakingly complex.

This newest cycle of tapes -- "Rendez-vous", "Deja Vu", and "Que Sera Sera" combined with "Disheveled Destiny" -- all cross cut between new footage and excerpts from earlier works. Accessing and commenting on his established oeuvre and previous personas, Campbell becomes brilliantly self-reflexive: an auto-critique that doubles all previous doublings. The effect is like a hall of mirrors. Campbell cunningly heaps further narrative twists on earlier paradoxes. In the "Rendez-vous"/"Deja Vu"/"Que Sera Sera" trilogy, the androgynous Colleena emerges as the female double of Art Star. The Woman from Malibu finally has a name: Mildred. Apparently, she never really died in the Mojave: she's back for revenge. (When I commented on how garish the aging Mildred's eye shadow was in "Que Sera Sera", Colin chimed gleefully, "I guess we never knew because she was in black and white before!") In "Disheveled Destiny" Campbell plays two characters: Art Star revisiting Sackville 30 years later, and Colleeta Sackville-West, a local historian and double for Colleena. Each tape is full of references to earlier works, enough so that this too could become a subject for further research. That is not my intention here. What need to be said is this: Campbell implodes his own mythology in a way that few artist could (or would), because he had already built this reflexive space into his work, an escape hatch that would allow him to be both critical and respectful of his own practice.

"I can never think of endings. Conclusions don't interest me. They don't exist".

Colin Campbell on Colin Campbell in
"Video By Artists" (Art Metropole, 1976)

Up until his death, Colin was planning to do yet another tape with Colleena. In the next episode, Colleena (running from the

law after the death of Mildred) would be working in cognito at a sardine stand in Portugal. I would like to leave you with this image of Colleena, an image from an unfinished work; a tape that was never started and never completed. It lends an aura of openness to Colin's practice that I think is important to maintain. Colin Campbell avoided closure, strategically evading it at every turn. I want to be respectful of Campbell's need to deny endings, now especially, when we will be soon overrun by attempts to eulogize his practice.

The truth of who we are is not easy to determine. What is this aspect of ourselves which goes beyond the physical appearance? This sense of self that emerges mysteriously from within? Part of this problem, for Campbell anyway, comes from a sense of his own identity being curiously doubled:

"...I don't have a great deal of confidence about knowing what men are thinking about. I feel more comfortable writing characters that don't have to be definitely a man or a woman. I think that's because all men and women share a common voice at many points. I don't think that's unusual or unique." (Colin Campbell in interview with Sue Ditta)

For Campbell, essence and identity are not fixed. They exist and yet they do not. It is a curious balancing act of being and non-being, a contradictory play of images and contents, of false truths and true lies.

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SOURCES

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