Peter Campus: Inference and Actuality

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I

The late 60s in the United States coincided with the waning grip of closed Formalism. This senescent Formalism maintained the view that only issues implicit to species typology were real–were "formal"–art issues. Painting and sculpture were viewed as integrally different from other arts and, in their case, each mirrored and reversed the other; luminosity versus opacity, pictorialism versus sculpturalism. The Formalist, involved with species clarity, attempted to define and preserve the neatest definition of those activities uniquely germane to any art typology. Painting imperiously was defined by issues absolutely inherent to the art of painting. Similarly, sculpture was defined by activities uniquely pertinent to sculptural activities. The evolution of species technologies determined the proper evolution of the correct form of a legitimate species-type. Not that the Formalist saw painting and sculpture as necessarily superior to say, poetry, the dance or music; it was simply that the Formalist would not admit, as germane to painting and sculpture, those issues by which the other arts received definition–say, literary content, movement or temporality.

The success of this critical view in the period following the Second World War through the mid-60s need not be enlarged upon. It is especially easy to grasp when viewed in the polymorphous matrix of Pop culture against which it vigorously militated. By 1966, Minimalism, the sensibility then most profoundly associated with Formalism, had succeeded in exercising a strong attraction upon a younger generation of artists. A certain problem arises in this scheme, namely, that the forms of Minimalism–square and cube, circle and sphere, triangle and pyramid–had created in fact a continuum from two to three dimensions which rendered iconic the vaunted independence of species-type so essential to Formalism. In freeing figure/ground gestalts in painting and expanding these groundless figures into space, Minimalism had succeeded in encapsulating and rendering continuous the essential formal properties of painting versus sculpture. (1)

The Minimalist continuum of typology was paralleled by the contemporary deflation of linked hierarchical assumptions: painting lost frame since painting was frame; sculpture lost base since sculpture was base. The ratio–art/indoors versus nature/outdoors–was also rejected. "With the loss of time honored conventions . . . once art became part of an infinite continuum ranging from interior to exterior and species to species–painting and sculpture could quite naturally evolve towards and encompass theatricality," i.e., issues of temporality and literary content. "To the painter or sculptor, theatricality offered itself as an alternative to the loss of belief in facture, in species-type, in retinality, and in site that had taken place." (2) Certainly, the *sine qua non* of painting–traces of sensitively stroked surface–had by the end of the 60s and early 70s been fundamentally, perhaps irrevocably lost although for many, such activity still remained painting's primary ambition.

A caveat: Many will view this argument as an alternative Formalism, a Formalism of inevitability. Even granting this possibility, the historical model that I submit still allows for the existence and proliferation of a much broader range of art activity, an "informalism" rejecting no category. If there is a hesitation on my part, this reluctance is directed towards imagery or iconography rather than issues of form.

The issue of Photo-Realism emerges at this time. On one hand, this realist revival perpetuates a commitment to popular imagery,

Campus *Three Transitions, Part I* 1973 videotape

Campus INTERFACE 1972 closed circuit video projection

one originated much earlier on by the Pop artists; on the other, Photo-Realism represents an evasion by debased literary content of the seemingly anarchic openness of the present Post-Minimalist phase. The Photo-Realist, unnerved by the open situation of the late 60s and early 70s, countered anxiety with a mock-politic, the red herring of popular iconography.

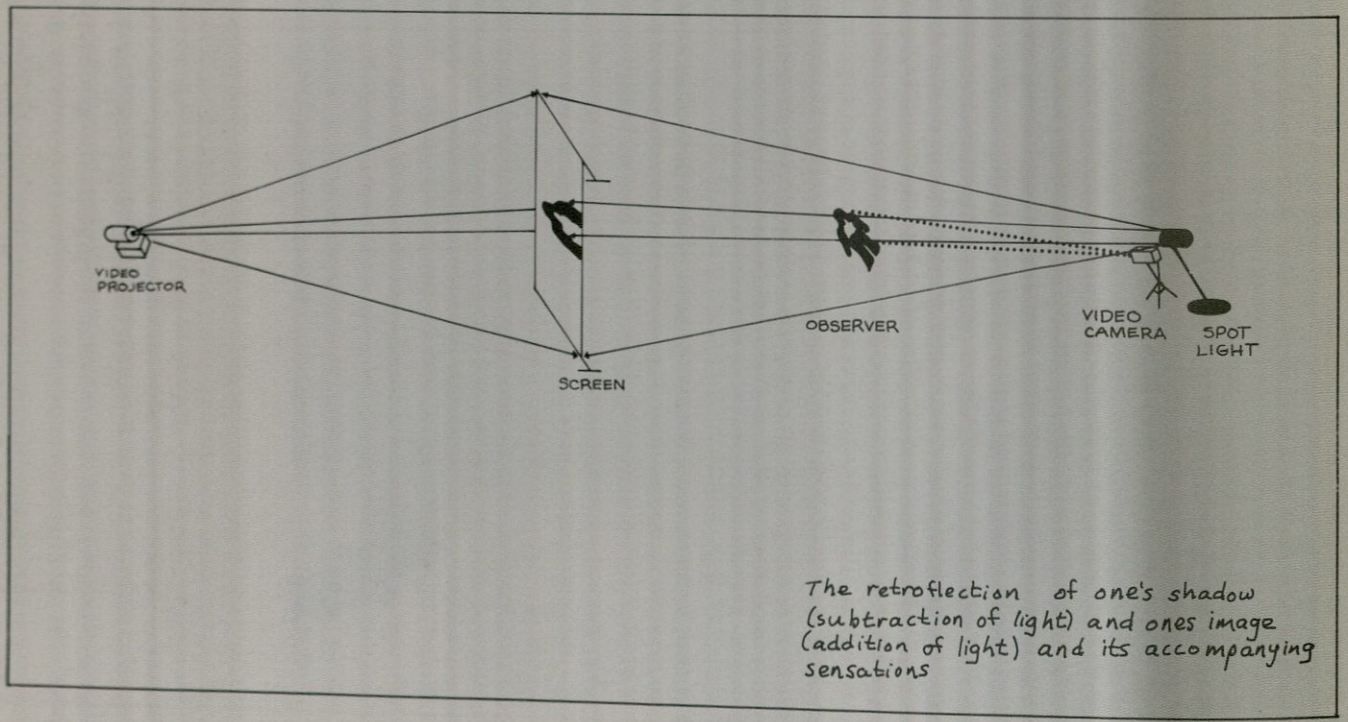
This new watershed was further complicated by the conceptual aspects of Post-Minimalism. In my scheme, the Conceptual movement stems largely from two sources, the one epistemological, the other ontological; the one addressing theories of knowledge, the other theories of being; the one deriving from Kasimir Malevitch, the other from Marcel Duchamp. (3)

Peter Campus joins this multiple and ranging situation on completing his first film in 1966. That film technology and video technology should have attracted him at this time was, to my view of things, far more an inevitability than a happenstance. Peter Campus's work illuminates a subtle paradox; that painters and sculptors at last aware of the collapse of Formalism, were attempting to introduce issues of temporality into otherwise spare typologies. Temporality, for example, could be induced through the imaginative reconstruction of the processes necessary to the folding-marking systems of Dorothea Rockburne's "Drawings that Make Themselves" or Barry Le Va's motion distribution drawings or Richard Serra's enormous wall constructions, the apprehension of which could be gathered in full circuit, as in the case of Robert Smithson walking the gravel road of SPIRAL JETTY, or in the numerous serialized structures of the photographic Conceptualists like John Baldessari. I cite examples at random.

By the late 60s and early 70s, then, painting and sculpture attempted to remain vital through the introduction of implicit or explicit temporal systems. Temporality and theatricality—for the Formalist, the real issues by which painting and sculpture were undermined as species-types—became instead the driving impulsions toward establishing new groundworks for painting and sculpture. And yet, with what reluctance were these temporal and theatrical possibilities admitted! Often the greatest resistance came from the artists themselves who, on one hand acknowledged the urge toward temporal and narrative operations while on the other, clung to the preservation of the Formalist status quo, the typological integrity of painting and sculpture.

Even in their indecision, painters and sculptors were in advance of artists dependent upon elaborate mechanical technologies. The artist working in such methods persisted in imagining that an Expressionist grafting of synthesized electronic images to outmoded pictorial cliches were imageries still sufficient to legitimize their efforts. Many, indeed most artists primarily identifying themselves as technological artists, considered that their evolution was separate from that of modern painting and sculpture, that the path of "tech-art" was removed and autonomous because of its very commitment to "new technologies."

I hold a contrary view. Even granting the authentic issues inherent to differences in technologies, "tech-art" has always been committed to inherited imagery, an imagery dependent upon achievements made in painting and sculpture. From the "tech-art" of the graphics explosion of the Renaissance to the photographic, ultimately cinematographic developments of the modern era, "tech-art" has tended to address itself to the exploitation of popular iconographies. In this sense, the engraved block of the 15th century is no different from the film strip or the videotape of the 20th; they all tend to express the Pop manifestations of their own epochs.



Campus Drawing for SHADOW PROJECTION 1974

Campus SHADOW PROJECTION 1974 closed circuit video projection, installation at Walker Art Center. ▷

Peter Campus's singular achievement, it seems to me, was his early recognition of the transmutability of the historical processes I have been talking about. Recognizing that painting and sculpture were now actualizing their viability as species through the introduction of issues of temporality, Campus reversed priorities. He imposed a static vision of painting and sculpture, one might say a Formalist vision, upon issues of technology and temporality by which video art had previously identified itself. Aspects of this position derive from Andy Warhol's "Stillies," and Bruce Nauman's seemingly static and body-referring technological works in holography and videotape. In short, Campus forced the technology of video to accede to the species identity of painting and sculpture. The central drift of this technology was to render to "tech-art" the fused species identity of painting and sculpture. Campus's preferred experiences are quiet, static, immobile, centered and grave. In his work a triple bracketing of immense richness and elusiveness occurs: Campus's work negotiates 1) a reorientation of "tech-art's" debasement through bankrupt popular expressionist imagery; 2) an actual structure that is abstract in Formalist terms; and 3) an iconography linked to hermetic and autobiographical mythology.

II

Born in 1937, Peter Campus and his brother Michael enjoyed the privileged New York childhood of the intellectual sort available to a doctor's children in Morningside Heights. Peter roamed the Columbia University area and attended the Walden School. With the 40s and 50s came the death of Campus's mother, the remarriage of his father to a woman of another faith, with two children of her own. These biographical details perhaps appear incidental except in one interpretive construct—as a psychological model for Campus's video works, arrangements in which a binary structure may echo—as the artist feels they do—Judeo-Christian duality or paired sibling conflict and accord. Tellingly, Campus's brother is a maker of feature films.

With the altered ethnic atmosphere of Morningside Heights, the family moved to Bayside, Queens, a re-location tied to adolescent anti-social behavior. Campus "dissembled" as a Queens gang member until he was recognized to be the intellectual he is. Introspection, math, engineering follow.

At Ohio State between 1955-60, he studied engineering but gave it up for experimental psychology in which he earned a Bachelor of Science degree. The training in psychology precluded all interpretive analyses—no Freud, no Jung. Campus felt an antipathy toward Behaviorist theory as well—disputed Skinner—and was more attracted to Gestalt psychology and to its experimental and clinical processes. "A lot of my aesthetic came out of experimental psychology." (4)

The latter years of his college career were marked by the general 50s drift towards Rilke, Camus, Existentialism. Campus read Rilke's *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, began to paint, investigating its possibilities rather more as an art therapy than as a closed self-referential system of visual knowledge. By the end of the 50s, Campus recognized himself as the primary object of his psychological curiosity. Like a fine technological instrument, he discovered himself acutely in tune with physical pressures and nuances. As is often the case with heightened response, Campus felt he could "read people, instantaneously." This naive view of the possibilities of art is one long outgrown in Campus's production—although it remains essential to much video investigation of the autobiographical sort exemplified today, say, by the work of Vito Acconci.

College years were followed by military training in the Reserves. At boot camp, Fort Knox, Kentucky, Campus first met a peer artist, Robert Grosvenor, who provided him with his earliest view of a committed artist. Campus was attracted by the "oddity—the kind of energy that nobody else had. Grosvenor's devotion to art interested me—his dedication to worthwhile activity."

While still in the Army, Campus rented a little studio in Augusta, Georgia and was on the brink of becoming a painter. But by 1961, he was back in New York City studying at the City College Film Institute, a center founded by Robert Flaherty but no longer in existence. Still accommodating, Campus thought that "Film seemed a way of making a living and being in a quasi-art field." The Film Institute aimed at transmitting know-how—a trade school. The explosion of the study of the critical syntax of film is a phenomenon of the late 60s and 70s. Campus's training as a filmmaker occurred prior to this evolution.

Campus moved into film production management, addressing energies to such details as film budget and crew payroll. These business aspects of filmmaking, 1963-64, were transposed to similar concerns for television, 1965-66. Campus's administrative career is marked by economic success, a first marriage and a distaste for bohemian life. 1966 marks the beginning of his conscious commitment to "hard art" issues. By 1967, the circle of his colleagues had enlarged to include Ian Wilson and Charles Ross. Through Grosvenor he met his dealer-to-be, Klaus Kertess and Joan Jonas, the dancer-filmmaker.

In 1966, Campus made his first film, *Dark/Light*, a five minute examination of an archetypal duality dealing with the striving subject of "the death of anima." The film was shot, edited and financed by the artist and is in the collection of The Museum of Modern Art. The artist rejects it now for its studious pretensions. But with the making of this film, Campus's "success phase" ends. A failed marriage is also abandoned.

In 1970, after "making no art," except to shoot the film of an early Joan Jonas performance on a Long Island beach, Campus turned to film editing. At that time, he met his present wife, the dancer Tannis Hugill.

III

Peter Campus's works of the last three years are generally characterized by a binary structure and double image. (5) The artist prefers the term "polarity" to "binary." "Binary" implies discrete, polarity concerns continuity. Images tend to be both negative and positive, either superimposed on one another or approaching one another. The spectator-subject wanders into a live video field, a kind of arena. His/her image is picked up by a TV camera and may be transmitted to a monitor although often as not, it is projected onto a screen or wall. The projector throws an electronic image upon a front face or a rear face although the notion of "front" or "rear" arenas of action is perhaps incorrect. Does one properly speak of a "front" or "rear" space on a tennis court? Campus's works often duplicate this "tennis-court-like" structure. Implicit to such an arrangement is agonist and antagonist—from agon, the contest, and agony, the violent struggle, the suite of the contest. This existential edge is not foreign to the artist's experience of the space. These luminous projections, depending upon the source of the

throw of light, register negatively or positively on the front or rear face of the screen. Often the image reverses itself, turns in upon itself, parallels or becomes symmetrical.

These mirroring systems may relate to Campus's long fascination with self-loss, an experience he interprets as a psycho-physical dislocation manifested as the sense that one is one's own double, inhabiting this sensate world but experiencing it without affect. (6) That certain elements of Campus's structures are liable to psychological exposition is true enough though to stress this aspect is to falsify their content. Campus's art is, in the end, not about autobiography, psychology or mysticism except in so far as these refer back to the "hard art" problems essential to his video work, problems like surface, location, scale, delay, temporality, simultaneity.

The most literary manifestations of Campus's imagery are to be found in parts Two and Three of *Three Transitions*, videotapes which perhaps more than any others, deal with specific Surrealist content—the face erased, the face beneath the face, the destruction of self through the magical burning of the paper upon which the living image is registered. Such imagery derives from the memory bank of Surrealism and is prefigured in the poetics of Jean Cocteau.

The first tape of *Three Transitions* is an ironical *tour de force* in which the viewer perceives at the same instant and in quadruple layering the front and back of a field and the front and rear image of the artist himself. With a Lucio Fontana-like laceration, the artist slashes through the visual field, creating in this violent gesture both entrance and exit, impossible instant and uninhabitable space. This impossible time, action and vision can only exist ideationally (as a concept) or within the ambiguity of an artistic or pictorial space rather than within sensory space. Pragmatically, it can only exist in video. That a birth is enacted when the artist steps through the rent in the surface seems obvious. But that it may represent both a suicide as well as the ritual murder of Field Painting—the last vestige of Formalism—is perhaps less than immediately apparent. This multiplication of inference and actuality exists only in the magical place of poetry.

The first episode of *Three Transitions* is one in which the artist is born, commits suicide and slaughters Modernist abstraction while rendering contemporary the passage through the mirror of Cocteau's *Orpheus*, not to mention Alice's adventures *Through the Looking Glass*. This dual relationship between now and past focuses on a novel instant—the almost immediate present, the just immediately past, the verge-actual.

Campus is a strong artist because he rejects the conventionally direct proportions between video-image, middle technology, and middle iconography. Despite its use of technology, the narrative content of Campus's work is only implicit or at any rate, highly repressed, since video—whatever it is—when used, must engage narrative content if only the lean narrative content of spatial contrast and discrepancy.

For me, the notion of space, the hardest art problem of all, engages at its inception the narrative flaw of spatial contrast. Campus's circumvention of this is perhaps the most arresting achievement of his work. It is why, despite the technological necessities of his installations, his work still seems so eminently pictorial—the birth of painting engages at its core the cancellation of the narrative flaw implicit to the very notion of space.

(1) The historical model of this switching of terms is to be found in comparing Analytical Cubism to Synthetic Cubism. In the one, painting analyses natural form according to a sculptural model found in African ritual carving—in the other, Constructivist sculpture assumes the pictorial ideal realized in the collage.

(2) Robert Pincus-Witten, "Theatre of the Conceptual: Autobiography and Myth," *Artforum*, Oct. 1973, pp 40-46. Reprinted, *Marcel Duchamp In Perspective*, ed. Joseph Masheck, Prentice-Hall, New York, 1974, pp 162-172.

(3) Robert Pincus-Witten, "Bochner at MOMA: Three Ideas and Seven Procedures," *Artforum*, Dec. 1971, pp 28-30. "Sol Lewitt: Word ⟷ Object," *Artforum*, Feb. 1973, pp 69-72.

(4) Bruce Kurtz has noted the importance of Campus's education in psychology on his present work. "The experimental emphasis of Campus's thinking is evidenced as early as the late 50s, when he was a student of experimental psychology at Ohio State University . . . The relationship between thought and various controlled influences on it is central both to the discipline of experimental psychology and to Campus's art . . ." Bruce Kurtz, "Fields," *Arts Magazine*, May-June, 1973, p 28.

(5) This, of course, is based on a generalized view of Campus's work. A straight accounting of this corpus is given in *Peter Campus: Closed Circuit Video*, a catalogue by David Ross, then-curator of Video Arts at the Everson Museum, Syracuse, New York. In the Spring of 1974, a retrospective of Campus's career was held there. Ross's essay is essentially a description of the mechanical set-ups for SHADOW PROJECTION, KIVA, NEGATIVE CROSSING, INTERFACE, OPTICAL SOCKETS, STASIS, and ANAMNESIS. To this list must be added a work called MER not included in the Everson retrospective and all of Campus's tapes to date and not described by Ross. Of this production, INTERFACE appears to be the work that has generated the most extensive commentary. In many ways, it and SHADOW PROJECTION epitomize the essential issues of Campus's work and as such tend to be the works which represent as well much of my discussion. In strong distinction to Bruce Kurtz and myself, David Ross isolates himself from psychological or Duchamp-related interpretations.

(6) Bruce Kurtz has convincingly likened this structural relationship to Duchamp's THE LARGE GLASS. In his early examination "Video is Being Invented," this liaison was only putative and in the last instant, rescinded: "But the formal similarities of these two works are only incidental." *Arts Magazine*, December - January 1973, p 43. Shortly thereafter, in "Fields," Kurtz overcame his hesitation and proposed that "the mediumistic character of INTERFACE allies it to Duchamp's THE BRIDE STRIPPED BARE BY HER BACHELORS, EVEN, or THE LARGE GLASS . . . Another curious parallel is that neither of the works were, nor ever will be, completed, as by the nature of their content they are continuous. There are formal similarities, also, in both artists' use of glass, mirrors, pyramids, reflections, lenses, and forms that deal with alterations of optical impressions." *Arts Magazine*, May - June 1973, p 27.