Flesh Winnow
Barbara Campbell

Six performances
1997-2001
The University of Sydney

EDITED BY LAURA GINTERS AND BARBARA CAMPBELL

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INTRODUCTION

Flesh Winnow and the Rhetoric of the Pose

Sarah Miller

Each year a postcard arrives: a portrait of artist Barbara Campbell 'photographed'—as I read recently—'in various incarnations since 1983'. Small performative moments, they nevertheless reveal the characteristics I hold dear in Campbell's work: deftness, economy of scale, an attentive eye and a listening ear; a capacity for analysis that to quote from another work, 'has not forsaken the appeal of the sensual and the sennuous'; a commitment to ideas and the capacity to embody them using disparate materials both tactile and ephemeral; and last but certainly not least, a wickedly precise sense of humour.

These miniature performances captured annually in a single, still photograph are carefully staged, but each year Barbara invites another friend to 'point and press', naming each one 'photographer' and thus complicit in her action. As the friend who snapped the portrait, Gowing's Stoel, so carefully established by Barbara in 1991, I can assure you that the action of taking the photograph, while carrying no artistic or technical responsibility whatsoever, creates an extraordinary sense of complicity between the artist and her most immediate audience for that moment—the 'photographer'.

And of course you can't help wondering why you were chosen to click the shutter on that specific image with that particular title. Did I ask? Writing today, more than a decade later, while I remember my mixed feelings of responsibility and trust and the experience as funny if slightly worrying, I am far less certain of the relationship between my experience in shooting that single image and their accumulation over nearly 20 years. That collectively they form a kind of evolving self-portrait—referencing her concerns as an artist and the invisible connections between past and present, art and life—seems obvious as does the tension between the carefully managed composition on the one hand and the casual postcard format on the other. Thinking about it now, I'm a little surprised that they appear (almost) in public, disseminated as they are through Barbara's extensive mailing list. On the other hand, those apparently private acts, committed in public places, have always been central to her practice.

With an artist as informed and self-aware as Barbara Campbell, however, there are always other issues at stake, some of which may be traced directly to her ongoing
analysis and meticulous investigation of diverse histories and theories. In talking about her 1991 performance, The Diamond / Nickel Affair, Campbell argued that 'it is almost impossible to comprehend history as truth' and it is this concern for the interpretation of history and aspects of translation that must always be taken into consideration in any discussion of Campbell's work.

The relationship between performance and photography is often cited in histories of performance art not only in terms of the confessional desire to document ephemeral works. Simply, as many commentators have noted, much photography embodies more or less the same problematics and in particular, a desire to problematise and not resolve art's relation to its audience. Moreover, both may be read in terms of presence and absence. As Anne Brennan writing for this publication notes,

we think that memory is like a photograph, or like a film or video clip. You see the analogy all the time in movies and books and you can understand why. After all, the photographic image promises some kind of true record, in spite of what we know about its capacity for duplicity.5

This capacity for duplicity and the attendant suspicion around such work recurs in theories and histories of performance and the photographic portrait. Henry M. Sayre reminds us, quoting Craig Owens, that 'to strike a pose is to present oneself to the gaze of the other as if one were already frozen, immobilised - that is, already a picture. It affirms interiority as the condition of portraiture.5 Further, he argues, this time citing Roland Barthes on photography, that 'there has always been a sense of the staged in portraiture, a sense that we see is a tableau that its characters have chosen to perform.7 Thus I want to argue that the postcards, while the smallest if perhaps also most persistent of Barbara Campbell's works, are, in a sense, emblematic. The recurrence of terms like 'duplicity', 'assurite', 'masquerade' and 'impersonation', and the not so subtle implication of narcissism pertaining to anything staged or composed, has historically seen performance described as an improper but nonetheless appropriate mode of expression for women similarly characterised as inherently false and duplicitous. While Campbell's work has never been didactic, there is no doubt that her performances were informed by the feminist art practices of the early 1980s and that, in our sense, her re-presentations of diverse materials to create a kind of assemblage portrait of often infamous women were recuperative acts. Similarly as a performer, portrait maker and female artist, Campbell's presumingly triplicated capacity for duplicity has allowed her to turn these preconceptions on their respective heads, as a means of challenging orthodox and ostensibly objective and object-centred histories.

Barbara Campbell is a performance artist, a description that, as she herself says, 'sarily exists those who ask just what it is she does.8 Moreover at the beginning of the third millennium, there are few now who willingly identify themselves as such. Not only in the popular, but in the arts-educated mind, the distinction generally to be made is between 'fine' artists (object-makers) who paint, sculpt, draw, and so on, and the performing artists who dance, sing, act, or play a musical instrument. Throughout her many performances, however, Campbell has probably done, or at least employed, all of these things. She has sculpted soap, and she has carefully embroidered in three languages - one of the casket letters of Queen Mary of Scots. She has - if not precisely danced - skidded endlessly. She has engquared images onto acrylic and she has typed multiple copies of Conrad's Heart of Darkness onto rice paper.9 She has employed props and used various media from the written word to film, video and sound, but these in themselves are not the defining characteristics of her work. In Campbell's own words, no set of signature performing skills defines my work at the public level. The regular skill that runs through all my performances at the public level is the one that is least public, that is the underlying research.'10

For 10 years, the substance of Campbell's performance art was largely concerned with the ways in which women—whether fictional or historical, mythological or everyday—were represented, however peripherally, the popular imagination, from Ariadne to Arachne, Mary Queen of Scots and Marie Antoinette, Lizzie Borden, Tokyo Rose, Patty Hearst, Carmen, Giselle Silon, Eleanor Coppola, Julia Margaret Cameron and Trukenbim.'11 Campbell's forensic approach to historical, literary and visual evidence weaves together, excerpts and illuminates apparently disparate threads to create quietly understated and open-ended narratives. Campbell has described her function as that of a medium, directing our attention to the past and present ghosts of our shared experience, a kind of 'non-spiritual intermediary between latent historical material and living audience'.12

Campbell's research into any one of these women, while certainly exploiting the conventional avenues—primary and secondary source documents, as well as the iconographic histories surrounding them—also ventures into rather different territory with what Clare Grant has described as her 'meticulous preparatory work'.13 For example, the embroidery on Mary Queen of Scots' skirt, the manually typed text for Baskaw or the carved soap sculptures for The Mourning of Liza Borden. In any Barbara Campbell performance
you can be sure that each item will have been carefully chosen for its aural, visual, physi-
cal and/or functional role and that the choice of media and materiality of such items will carry a precise—albeit often opaque—relationship to her subject. But opacity should not be understood as wilfully obtuse, but rather as the logical outcome of an utterly ethical commitment to the limits of our knowing. In combining a sceptical approach to both language and history, juxtaposed with a commitment to the precise use of materials, Campbell indulges us, her audience, to imagine, to think beyond familiar parameters, to experience her performances ‘on both a sensual and intellectual level’.

The culmination of this body of work came with *Fresh Glories*, a performance pre-
seated as part of the exhibition *Artspace* and the *Everyday* and designed for the National Portrait Gallery in Canberra where it was presented in 1997. *Fresh Glories* took at its starting point ‘the photographically perceived face of a once living human being’.

Trukanini, most often and misleadingly captioned as ‘The Last Tasmanian Aborigine’, in creating this work, Campbell embarked on what was, even for her, an unusually long and complex research project, which encompassed, among other things, consultation and discussion with students and staff at the Risokuna Centre for Aboriginal Studies in Launceston. A direct consequence of this consultation process was Campbell’s considered decision not to include any visual representations of Trukanini in her performance, focusing instead on ‘the portrait makers and the technologies that were deployed by artists in bringing the object of Trukanini before the colonial audiences of the 19th Century’.

While the relationship between subject and object in portraiture is a long and troubled one, the circulation of staged portraits and images of Trukanini have func-
tioned to privilege colonial propaganda as a means of denying the continued existence and contemporary lives of Tasmania’s Aboriginal peoples. As Roland Barthes so famously described in *Mythologies*, through his analysis of the *Portraits* cover showing a black sol-
dier saluting the French flag, the image in these cases becomes part and parcel of an unassisted but systematic effort to promulgate a colonial myth: ‘It is a consummate act of bad faith’... By refusing to generate further images of Trukanini, and preferring the creation of ‘fresh’ images of Australian politicians, Campbell draws careful attention to the colonial apparatus still at work in Australia today. As always, Campbell is never so disassociated from the ability to see and hear that she sees only the formal dimension of the work. Her political decision transforms her performance from a merely formal examination of the genealogies of the visual representations of Trukanini into an assem-
ble of actions and materials which come to the spectator as bits of life, moments from our shared colonial history, and a recognition of the troubled and traumatic disjunction between the lived experience of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians.

This project marked a turning point that has had ongoing ramifications for her performance. As Campbell has noted, it led her to review the assumption that she was free to pursue the subject of her choice. On the one hand, this has led her to look more closely at the specifics of her own family history, for example, in the works *Subterranean* and *Remains*. On the other hand, it has also perhaps resulted in a stronger con-
sideration of aspects of the particular Australian identity and context from within which she creates her performances. As Joan Kerr articulates in her essay on *The Machine, old again*, it also allows Campbell to reflect on the effects of European Modernism in Australia: her subject is not the impurity of Australian Modernism as measured against some external standard, but the particularity and peculiarity of local results. This pre-
occupation, however, has persisted throughout Campbell’s performance course. From the outset, whether it was the early performance, *The Selection of Art*, which saw her enact the role of witness on viewing Jackson Pollock’s *Blue Poles* for the first time on its tour around Australia, or postcards captioned respectively *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1917), *Late Modernist* (1996), or *The Return of Cubism* (1998), Campbell has testified to the many selves which speak before the Modernist art object.

Even the title of this survey, *Fresh Glories*, speaks to the local effects of European and North American Modernism. The title is a pun on Marcel Duchamp’s post-
war work, *Fresh Widow*, which is a pun on the form of the work, a French win-
dow. In this work, Duchamp replaced panes of glass with black leather. An instruction accompanies the work that the panes ‘should be shined every day like shoes’. It is a work about mourning, an emotionally precise evocation of those experi-
ences that can neither be contained nor explained, but only experienced, or evoked. The influence of Duchamp Similarly pervades two of the performances described in this anthology: *Inferno* and *The Machine, old again*, the latter, among other things, being a deliberate conversation with Duchamp’s *Large Glass*. Not only does *Inferno* similarly address the performative ‘aesthetic of the pose’, but by inserting the live body of the nude female artist into the anthropological space of the Mackey Museum, it forces the viewer, to approach it (the object) differently, insisting on its status as both living ‘bash’ and as ‘Art’. The play is as old as Duchamp’s *Urinal* and, in its suggestive potential, stands against the purist and formalist Modernism first championed by the likes of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried.

Yet it is Greenberg’s purist Modernism that we too quickly associate with the idea of Modernism itself, despite the ongoing influence and pervasive effects of an alter-
native, anti-formalist Modernism through which we may define a tradition that extends
from Duchamp through Dada and Surrealism to Minimalism, Pop Art and what we have broadly come to call the 'Post-Modern'. From the outset, what is embedded in these 'oppositional' practices is what was particularly offensive to its critics: the performative and the theatrical, the intrusion of the vernacular into the discourses of modern art and of course the shifting, but integral, relationship of the audience to the work of art. Campbell's evocative choice of Rilke Winoc as the title for this current survey seems to speak to all these 'other' histories by acknowledging not only her historical debt to Duchamp, but also the performative role of the body in feminist art practices, and, in her predilection for assemblage, the presentation of not only the wheat but also the chaff—equally—for our inspection.

The subtly unsettling and not always gentle acts of transgression which permeate Campbell's work resonate with each essayist in this publication. Clare Grant, writing on Cloke, identifies not only the 'disquieting mingling of the public and private' but the movement from 'voyeurism' to 'a level of anxiety', while Mary Roberts, writing on Inframon, describes how 'unc pill close, it felt as if we had crossed an invisible barrier without permission'. Campbell not only constructs the barrier, but also establishes the potential for transgression. In her curation of art historical precepts, as Joan Kerr enjoyably notes in The Machine, she takes Campbell's role as a provocateur and artist/writer Anne Brennan, on Situation, articulates their own associative practices, focusing rather more on the insertion of the vernacular, the personal and the familial into the spaces of art.

The six essays commissioned for this publication each describe a single performance created by Barbara Campbell at the University of Sydney, live under the aegis of the Department of Performance Studies, and for Sydney College of the Arts. Of these works, the only one I have seen is Romance, the work about her grandmother, dowage and the hard science of geomagnetism. As with photographic or video evidence, reading Joan Goudas' essay on this performance reminds me of my own experience of being there, reminds me too that Campbell's work is never about excess. She assembles precisely what is necessary. As spectators, as evidenced through this series of essays, we bring our own desires, anxieties and histories to meet our experience of the artist and her practice. In reading the other essays, their extraordinarily finely attuned attention to the denial and concerns of Campbell's practice makes me urgently wish that I had been there.

Each writer (including myself), given their individual histories and particular relationship to the artist, draws extensively on personal memories of particular performances to articulate a sense of Campbell's art practice. This, as I hope I have made evident, should not be understood as either incidental or sentimental. Performance is ephemeral and, despite its documentary or material traces, chooses to inhabit the space of memory and personal engagement. Nor, as shown by these essays, does this preclude a more considered appreciation of Campbell's craft: her acute research skills, her immersion in, and knowledge of, European, North American, and Australian art history; her ability to create a multi-layered performative space, and to generate complex historical parallels between past and present; between authorised and unauthorised systems of knowledge; and her unthinking ethical commitment to content as form. These qualities create performances that are both vital and necessary to our place and time.
Performing Art History: The Machine, oiled again
Joan Kerr

Above an illuminated sewing machine the naked, oiled body of a woman lies motionless on a table, her rear view facing the audience. The texture of her body is partly obliterated by the black-and-white abstract patterns continuously projected onto it, moving with mechanical mindlessness. The film loop playing across the body actually consists of close-up shots of a black shoe buffed by a New York shoeshine operator, although no trace of this or any other subject can be discerned. Not only do these shadowy patterns lack any identity of their own, but they also subvert the sensuality of the flesh by overlaying it with such a rhythmic, machine-like gloss.

Forward to one side a simple square screen displays a sequence of old-fashioned black-and-white slides. The projector, clearly in view, clicks with automatic regularity onto the next unidentifiable image. Its progress, however, is not determined by a computer, but by the remote control in the hand of that still, outstretched body. The noises made by the slides, the projectors, the sewing machine and the other equipment are no accident either; they are the components of a sound track made to accompany the performance, an aesthetic complement to the working machines so prominently (and quietly) in view.

The images on the screen seem almost as devoid of meaning as the shoeshine loop, yet not quite. Beneath the patterns of form, line and light an iconic modern sculpture, evidently a dehumanised head, struggles to emerge. Yet because the slides are so fugitive, fragmentary and distorted the identity of the photographed work remains evasively elusive. Frustrated members of the audience witnessing the performance well back in the dark (the most popular position for art audiences anywhere) blame themselves for not quite recognising something so bafflingly familiar, surely a modern icon that anyone watching a contemporary art performance should know. Edging forward, they peer more closely at the screen in vain hope it will reveal its secrets. The slide test from Hell, an art history teacher and a former student afterwards remark.

That Campbell intended The Machine, oiled again as a satire on a conventional art history lecture—and perhaps, more teasingly, as the slide test everyone fails—is obvious from the exceptionally apt location. This is a quintessential site-specific performance.