

## What's Left: *Cloche*

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I wouldn't have missed it—a one-off Barbara Campbell piece. One o'clock at the Rex Cramphorn Studio—grab a colleague and dash away for a couple of hours.

I've missed some Barbara Campbell performances but I have memories of them through the description of others. (Sarah Miller once described for example, the dismantling of the embroidered garment of Mary Queen of Scots so that I feel I have seen it). I have seen in performance the results of her meticulous preparatory work - the exquisite attention to detail in the embroidery of MQoS's dress<sup>1</sup>; the seemingly endless manually typed text of *Backwash*<sup>2</sup>—that resonate within the visual imagery to evoke the lives of historical and fictional figures. The graphic and the verbal frame the performer's body for an instant in a kind of exo-skeletal reference point, giving to the body something of the stillness of an object, a moving painting perhaps. I can stand with it, read it and watch the results of Campbell's painstaking arrangement of the sequence of specific actions in a prescribed period of time.

I've collected not all but most of her annually-produced postcards—photographic self-portraits that through her idiosyncratic selection of pose, objects and effect, hover between the seemingly accidental and the highly significant. They are not statements or messages, not accounts of milestones passed nor interpretations of a current mental state, but they seem also to be all of the above as well. Nor are they the play with identity that continues to engage Cindy Sherman,<sup>3</sup> but they are also that, though the evolving identity is possibly a fiction of her own. As they accumulate, they can be seen for what they are – postcards from a space in the life of an imagination. A concrete object that evokes the presence and shifting state of a specific imagination and a particular self.

These performances accumulate and repeat themselves in the mind and the imagination, but *Cloche* sits by itself. It situates itself in the body memory of its watchers and concerns itself much more with Campbell's response to a visceral but un-named preoccupation of her own and invites its audience to process issues of their own. Although it's three years since I witnessed the performance, its kinaesthetic impact remains, directly accessible to present physical memory.

On the day, at one o'clock, the audience spreads itself out in the semi-darkened space of the studio. It is a small, invited audience. There's a camera, or two, several monitors at the cardinal points of the room and a stool in the centre of the space, a microphone hanging from the ceiling above it. She slips into the space in her creamy-silk petticoat and dangly earrings, eyes focussed quietly on the stool. On her head the pale bathing cap with its whacky protuberances—incongruous with the earrings, the creamy silk and the

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<sup>1</sup> *Cries from the Tower* (1992)

<sup>2</sup> *Backwash* (1993)

<sup>3</sup> A US artist who has created a vast *oeuvre* of photographic portraits in which, using costume, prosthetics, setting and physical pose she transforms her identity to, and reconstructs figures from, contemporary media.

face's gentle attention. There is whimsy, intimacy and intent and a disquieting mingling of the public and private in this mix, underlined by the presence of a performer obviously very conscious of her purpose.

She sits, perched easily on the stool. I don't know where the scissors came from, and at first I don't read what they are for, but her eyes have engaged the monitor. She is using her own image as guide in (as I later learned) a reversed 'mirror' effect in which the image on the screen is 'flipped' to reverse the action, swapping right and left to create a reflection. It appears that she is using the tips of the scissors to lever the cap away from her head. While I wonder what's coming, I realise I'm hearing the exquisite crispness of the slicing scissors, crunched slightly louder by the hanging microphone. She's cutting the hair. The points of the scissors are sliding into the dark gap between the scalp and the cap and there's a moment of shock. I don't know when I found out that the cap was glued to the hair but, even without that knowing, the logic of the action is unquestionable—the only possible release from the hat is to cut the hair. It's funny and strangely scary and it's happening for real.

Twisting her neck and orientating her movements in her 'mirror', she manoeuvres the cap a little and peels it back as far as it will go. There's a strange sense that left is right and right is left because the mind expects a different image on this screen. Then she continues—the eyes still firmly fixed on the monitor with a kind of suspension of presence, the muscles of the lower face and jaw relaxed. There's no constructed performance persona here, just the image of someone intensely engaged in a personal action. The crisp snip of the scissors continues, and there's a dawning awareness that we have been invited here as witnesses to that action. Its purpose is not signalled but it is obvious that it is necessary that we are there to see her do it.

There's a claustrophobia in the closeness of the gap between skin and rubber cap. Campbell herself describes it as a 'crawlspacé'—a gap between levels in the underlying structure of a building through which one moves with some difficulty, presumably to effect a maintenance task. In that gap, although it is not immediately evident at first, is the glue that she has placed on her own hair, thus committing herself to the irrevocability of the action; there's only one way to go. In the narrow gap there is a play of images of female constriction and convention too perhaps, and there is also the glue compressing the space between skin, hair and cap, making the negotiation of the space an imperative.

We are here to witness an un-rehearsed action.

There's a moment of discomfort on realising this—a moment of shifting connection to the piece. The sense of time alters as the nature of the action becomes evident. This is also something I have not seen in Campbell's work before. There is a sense of shock when I realise I'm seeing something of Campbell 'herself' rather than a performed, fictionalised (if 'historical') figure. At the most trivial level the self I will see after the performance will have a different haircut! I'm looking in at something that has a different personal commitment for her. There is no pretence that we might 'understand' what the action means to the performer, and no necessity that we should. But it is clear that, unlike

her other works, this is not a visually based installation piece with an immediately readable logic. It is an event with indeterminate duration and a meaning that will not be clear till the action is complete, if then.

I suddenly feel the weight of my own legs, the pressure of it on my feet. I'm aware of my own presence in the room and I'm performing this piece too because I'm here and because I have no place to perch my own weight, no seat, no fixed, distancing viewing position. I have to find my own stable watching point. I look around to check where I want to be and note there is a camera recording the performance as well as the one feeding the monitor/mirror. Does it catch the audience? Does it matter to me? I decide not. The monitor is the key to her focus and my attention goes back to it with hers, catching the evidence of her effort in the image. It draws me back to re-engage in a rite whose purpose I still don't know but my sense of time has expanded. I am here for the duration and I am now simply watching the action as it unfolds, totally engaged with each snip of the hair.

Aware now of my own body, drawing on an internal knowing of every gesture, I am doubly aware of the threat of the scissors near the neck and scalp. She moves to cut at the back of the head, where the monitor gives no access. I feel the struggle through my body and I remember all the women who have tucked up the hair at the back of the neck, twisting and clipping and poking with pins that sometimes stab or scratch, do up a necklace or the back of the neck button alone. Campbell too is relying on a body memory, while maintaining the same delusion of checking what she cannot see in the 'mirror', much as I watched my country mother do as she dressed to do the shopping in the 'village'. Her eyes, too, fixed on the image in the mirror as she tipped her chin just so, let her eyes wander up and to the left to envisage the fingers meeting and measuring the gap between the two ends of the necklace catch. I thought I would never learn to do it. My mother seemed to see with the disembodied 'eyes in the back of her head' that she always said she needed. I am not sure whether these memories are triggered by the kinaesthetic associations with the action or by the sense the costume creates of a performer only half-ready for her public.

In this 'mirror', the awkward 'left-handedness' she must sometimes employ to reach some parts of the head becomes a kind of double left-handedness. The perceived awkwardness is deepened by the extended unselfconscious baring of the naked under-arms, alluring the viewer, especially when they are watching the screen, into a voyeuristic experience that seems almost accidental, doubly-voyeuristic. As the cutter cuts, the watcher catches the tilt of the head, the shifts of angle between chin, upper arm, ear, neck, and back of the head invite fleeting and shifting images of fashion-magazine coquettes, and a stream of images of painters' models. She's looking at the monitor, not at the camera, so her attention is deflected from the viewer and we see under her skin, as it were. We dip in under her awareness. She obviously can't have done this before so it becomes clear we are possibly seeing actions or struggles she mightn't have been able to predict. Maybe we're going somewhere she didn't anticipate.

The cap begins to loosen away from the scalp and it flops in her hands. It gets in the way as she tries to negotiate another spot at the back of the head. It looks heavy and it seems out of control, liable to knock the scissors, and might be another thing she could not have planned for. Voyeurism gives way to a level of anxiety. Jagged edges of hair poke off her scalp and out of the inside of the grotesque rubber of the inside of the cap – no longer ridiculous, even gruesome. In an instant, images of the boudoir flip into images of the concentration camp, French women collaborators, Joan of Arc and even of novice nuns preparing for a new life.

The jagged lines of hair and skin that are revealed on the scalp reinforce the fact that this is a once-off experience. Campbell's act of dispersal, homage, clarification, recognition slips into the memory and continues to do its vicarious work in the minds of the audience. Images seem to become memories and I remember the significance of the rite itself not for what it is for Campbell—apart from in very general terms, I do not know - but for what its enactment has meant for (and within) me. My body recalls her contortions, the imminent threat of stabbing, the sensation of the false scalp peeling away from the true one. It is not quite clear whether I remember the peeling of Campbell's scalp or my own and plays at the edge of the mind on the 'daft' days when you've accidentally put your bra on inside out and can't work out why the hooks won't meet.

So we won't see this piece again. We'll see an installation in the anthropology museum. Both performer and audience have moved on. Hanging beside the video image of the action with the sound of the scissors recreating the previous event, the cap and its ragged clumps of hair take on a new life of their own. However, unlike my own plaits, which were shorn off when I was about seven, and which my mother sent on to me in an enormous posting of half-forgotten possessions when she thought I had 'settled down', these objects are not forgotten relics accidentally stumbled-upon only in rare house-moves. The video replay creates the event anew while the hair and cap remind us of the 'work' which has gone into the construction of this new piece in much the same way that the elaborate writing/embroidering tasks gave resonance to the earlier ones. On that day in the studio we were party to Campbell's creation process and that creates echoes in any later viewings of the artist's work, even for those who were not there.