

## Performing Art History: *The Machine, oiled again*

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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 irritatingly evasive. 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 the 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. It takes place at night – in the dark – in the moat-like space between a public footpath and the R.C. Mills Building, home of the Power Department of Art History and Theory at Sydney University. The central composition of nude and sewing machine is set up beneath the deep masonry arch that forms the underside of the flight of steps bridging the gap and leading to the Mills Lecture Theatre, the place where most formal art history and theory lectures, slide tests and examinations take place on campus.

Submitting a captive audience to a lengthy progression of unidentifiable black and white slides is a witty and pointed send-up of far too many of the lectures delivered upstairs. Having sat through dozens (and given a couple myself), it's easy to appreciate how literally subversive this performance is. Indeed, *The Machine, Oiled Again* can be read purely as a diabolically clever parody of academic art teaching and learning, which appropriately takes the form of a presentation on early 20<sup>th</sup> century European modernism. This has always been the core of the foundation course in art-historical studies at Sydney University, thanks to the John Power Bequest that led to the creation of the Power Institute of Contemporary Art and its various components.

The images flashing up on the screen are mainly details from a chrome head by Constantin Brancusi in the Guggenheim Museum. Campbell took the photographs in 1998 while in New York on a Greene Street residency researching the influence of European modernism in Australia. The numerous black and white details, so odd and obscure in selection yet so professional and confident in presentation, are just like illustrations in one of those expensively austere modern art history textbooks emanating from small-circulation academic presses in the USA. Most of hers include reflections from the Guggenheim's great internal curved ramp spreading over the highly polished surface of the Brancusi sculpture like a spider's web. Their incorporation helps make it look like a scientific detail, a parody of the expert selection of a few distinctive brushstrokes, visible only in a raking light, as the crucial detail identifying the master's unique hand. Instead of being a formula for unmasking fakes, however, Campbell's details reveal the modernist magician's recipe for making humanity disappear under imposed geometric form.

There is a moral in the conjunction: Frank Lloyd Wright's great ramp is such a dominant feature of the Guggenheim that it inevitably distorts the exhibits in the visitor's perception and recollection. There is also a certain irony in the fact that Wright called his architecture 'organic' and asserted its basic humanism against the soulless machine forms employed by early European Modern Movement architects like Walter Gropius and Le Corbusier. In this case his great curving ramp is just another machine-age monster devouring the sculpture's residual human features.

As soon as the thing in the photograph is labelled 'Brancusi' and located in a museum the web of associations that have been overlaid on it over the years displaces its physical features. The history of such masterpieces is so well-known and so widely disseminated, the literature so extensive and the meanings so disputed, that anyone who has taught 20<sup>th</sup> century European art in the core Fine Arts I course at the Power Institute can discuss such an icon for hours. Few indeed would resist dusting off the web and re-presenting the virginal original, yet that would entirely miss the point of Campbell's photographs. They are neither the reflection nor the exhibit but the strange metamorphosis Campbell herself has created by combining the two.

The breathing still-life composition at the core of the performance needs no exegesis. Any neophyte art student anywhere in the western world – and every member of the audience – knows enough about 20<sup>th</sup> century art to associate a sewing machine with European Surrealism. Campbell's basic concept pays wry tribute to the surrealists' most cherished simile for sex, a quotation from *Les Chants de Maldoror* by Isidore Ducasse (Comte de Lautréamont): "as beautiful as the chance encounter of a sewing-machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table". Man Ray wrapped up a sewing machine in homage to Ducasse, but Campbell denies the supremacy of his mechanistic formula by reinserting that eternal symbol of sexual beauty, the female nude, above its inverted and distinctly sexless naked form. Hers is a flesh and blood reincarnation of the female sex machine from that key subversion in the modernist progression towards mechanical nothingness, Marcel Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even*. It parallels the voluptuous nude in Duchamp's posthumous museum installation, *Etants Donnés*.<sup>1</sup> But Campbell's

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<sup>1</sup> See Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (MIT Press: Cambridge Mass., 1993). Krauss's entertaining, revisionist contents influenced Campbell's performance, while the layout and illustrations are perfect examples of what I consider typical of a US academic press publication.

body is not spreadeagled for the voyeur nor viewable only through a peephole in a sophisticated, urban museum's rustic door. Her naked back, moulded into pure form by the chiaroscuro of light and (particularly) dark, seems closer to Man Ray's renowned Surrealist photograph of the rear view of a female torso as a cello than to Duchamp's secret, lascivious 'bride'.

A common feature of all these references is the peculiarly male modernist fetish for depicting a woman's body as a sexual machine. Campbell subverts the whole active male/passive female principle. The duality of the artist as creator of the nude and as the nude itself is far too ambiguous a concept to allow this woman's body to be interpreted solely as an inert instrument passively awaiting the master's touch. This supine body is both the dreamer and the dream. And the heroic modern masterpieces she is dreaming of are grotesquely deformed, or at least askew enough to be unidentifiable. Key images in the history of modern art are certainly evoked – obliquely and ambiguously in true Dada style – but none is a replica. Recognising them in no way crucial to appreciating the new work. This is not an art history test after all, but its precise opposite. *Not* recognising Brancusi, Frank Lloyd Wright, Man Ray and Duchamp is the name of the game.

*The Machine, oiled again* is partly a sardonic joke about the way art history is taught at Sydney University – in fact, at universities everywhere – and partly a provocative game about European art's all-pervasive but invariably misread sources. It challenges the transformation of the 19<sup>th</sup> century white salon nude into the pure white square of early modernism by focusing on the way that definitive geometric form has itself been mutated into alien shapes by time, location, memory and medium.

Above all, it is a serious thesis about the influence of modernism in Australia. The way memory and time transform the past, including apparently stable icons from a 'modern' movement now almost a century old, is currently a fashionable theoretical preoccupation for scholars everywhere. The distortion of the modernist images in Campbell's *Machine*, however, is not only due to the passing of time, the fallibility of memory and the impact of the museum context. The geographic location is even more crucial.

In the 1970s Imants Tillers was already pointing out in his paintings that an artistic canon known primarily through photographic reproductions has very different effects on its admirers to one handed down at the centre, in New York or Europe.<sup>2</sup> Campbell's Brancusi slides seem to convey a similar message, but she has inverted the basic proposition. Now that everyone can get perfect reproductions off the web (including most New Yorkers, I bet) she goes to the original in order to create her unique, antipodean distortions.

Whether the modern masterpiece belongs within the avant-garde mainstream (like the Brancusi) or to movements like Dada and Surrealism that sent modern art along more complex paths (like the Duchamp and Man Ray), any art produced under its influence in Australian in the 1970s was by definition irrelevant at the centre – created by outsiders

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<sup>2</sup> See in particular Imants Tillers, *Conversations with the Bride* 1974-75, a series of paintings that combines Duchamp's *Large Glass* and Hans Heysen's iconic gumtrees of *Summertime*: illustrated in Margaret Plant, 'Quattrocento Melbourne: Aspects of finish 1973-77, in *Anything Goes: Art in Australia 1970-1980* edited by Paul Taylor (Art and Text: South Yarra Vic., 1984), p.69.

whose references if too close were servile imitations, if too distant then clearly misunderstood. Naturally, Campbell and Tillers are well aware of this ‘provincialism problem’; it had been memorably defined for us all in 1974 by Terry Smith of the Power Institute of Contemporary Art.<sup>3</sup> Yet even then provincialism was primarily an academic problem – a predicament academics needed to resolve. For these artists at least it was a welcome fact. Terry Smith now lives in Pittsburgh, USA, but Campbell lives in Queanbeyan and Tillers lives in Cooma, NSW. Their Brave New World has always been here.

Australian artists no longer have to choose between being isolationist or emulative, if they ever did. Campbell does not deny the subjects of her photographs but what we are looking at are her own artistic creations, not bad snaps of a Brancusi. A sewing machine may be an irrepressible white male modernist symbol of heterosexual sex, but in this performance it is well and truly subordinated to Campbell’s own/ everywoman’s body. That it is also inverted is a pointer to its antipodean location as much as a snub to its sacredness. A Singer sewing machine has exclusively female connotations in Australia too, but as the symbol of the countrywoman supplying her family’s household needs even the maddest surrealist would surely be reluctant to label it erotic.

As an alternative modernist manifesto, *The Machine, oiled again* is inchoate, distorted and provincial. As a thesis about the influence of European modernism in Australia, inchoate, distorted and provincial is a pretty profound starting point. Campbell does not deny the international importance of the European modernist canon (an enterprise doomed to failure if attempted from Queanbeyan anyway, as Norman Lindsay discovered when he tried to annihilate Picasso from Springwood). Her subject is not the impurity of Australian modernism as measured against some external standard but the particularity and peculiarity of local results. As such, *The Machine, oiled again* is a key work in the new history of modernism in Australia – a book as yet unwritten. Barbara Campbell is too clever for words.

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<sup>3</sup> See Terry Smith, ‘The Provincialism Problem’ 1974, reprinted in *Anything Goes* edited by Paul Taylor (Art and Text: South Yarra Vic., 1984), pp.46-53.