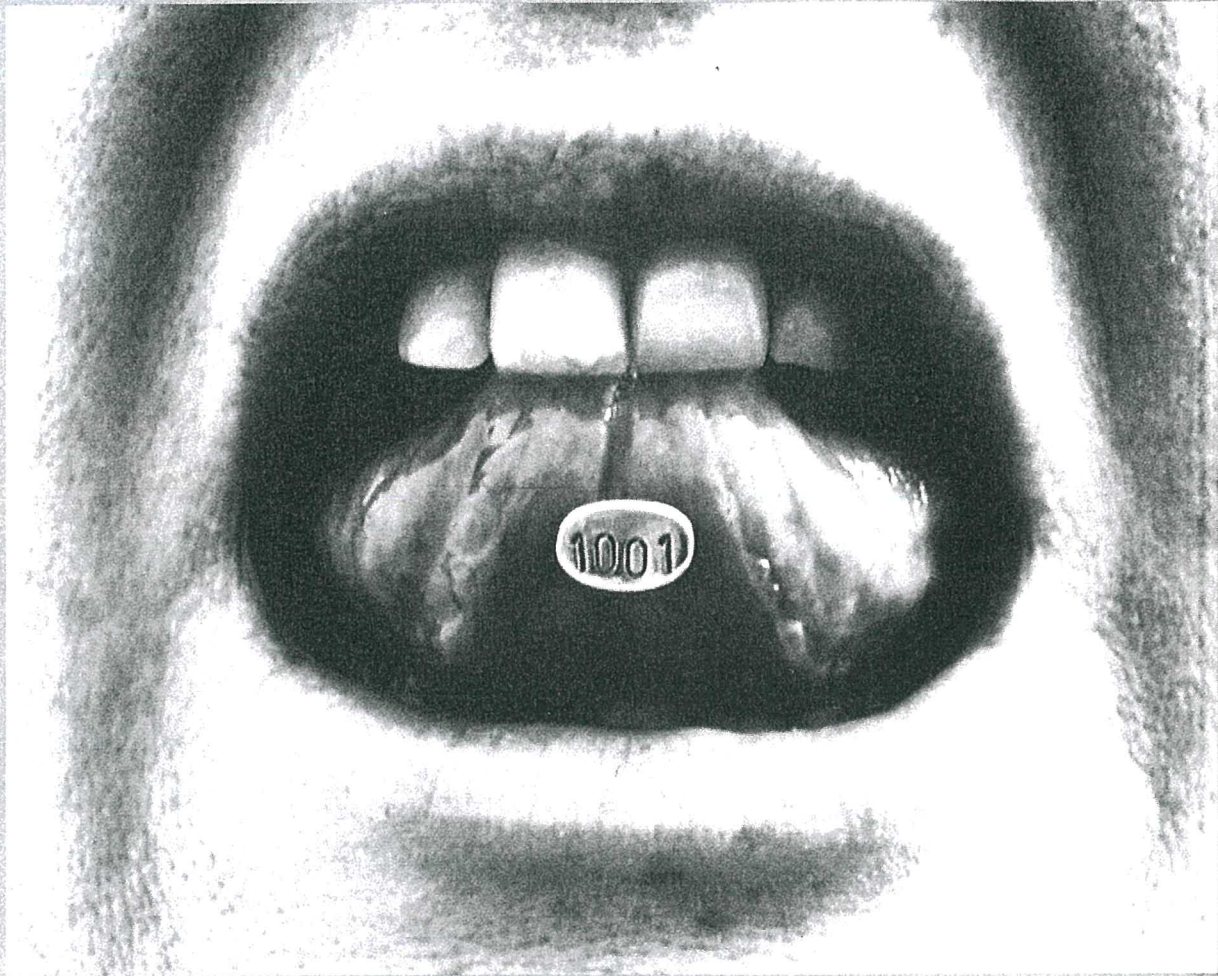


Performance Research

VOLUME 17 NUMBER 5 OCTOBER 2005

On Duration



- 1 Introduction : The end of spatiality or the meaning of duration
EDWARD SCHEER
- 4 Sleeping Drivers [artist's pages]
NICK KLINE
- 5 Forever Ephemeral : John Cage's *ASLSP*
JEFFERY BYRD & JOHN FRITCH
- 9 Blurred Architecture : Duration and performance in the work of Diller Scofidio + Renfro
RACHEL HANN
- 19 'The Lovers' : On the Great Wall and beyond
CHLOE JOHNSTON
- 24 Remembering, Repeating and Working Through in 'Anniversary – an act of memory' by Monica Ross and Co-Reciters (2008–)
ALEXANDRA M. KOKOLI
- 31 Strange Attractors : Barbara Campbell's *1001 nights cast*
BRANISLAVA KUBUROVIĆ
- 34 Einstein on the Beach : A study in temporality
SUSAN BROADHURST
- 41 Archaeological Explorations of Duration in the Contemporary City
JAMES DIXON
- 47 Signs of the Times : Structures and signatures
TONY GARDNER
- 54 Line Dialogues : Marking time and process [artists' pages]
JANE GRISEWOOD & CARALI MCCALL
- 56 Open Your Eyes/Shut Your Eyes : Staging Kandinsky's *The Yellow Sound* at Tate Modern
GERAINT D'ARCY & RICHARD J. HAND
- 61 Media Dramaturgies of the Mind : Ivana Müller's cinematic choreographies
MAAIKE BLEEKER
- 71 This Progressive Production : Agency, durability and keeping it contemporary
MARY RICHARDS
- 78 The Conversion of Essence into Series: A Dance of Repetition from Vermeer to Leibniz [artists' pages]
PAUL JEFF & LAURA JENKINS
- 82 The Speed of Broken Light : A meditation on duration and performance
TED HIEBERT
- 92 On Consuming Encounters : Short duration and the material conditions of performance
SAINI MANNINEN
- 98 On Duration and Multiplicity
LARA SHALSON
- 107 Life [In Progress]
JANEZ JANŠA
- 110 When is a Performance? : Temporality in the social turn
JAMES ANDREW WILSON
- 119 'Perform-Box' : Towards an architecture-of-time
V. ŞAFAK UYSAL & LEVENT ARIDAĞ
- 130 Meal Time as Medium : Duration and the work of AO& WOOD ROBERDEAU
- 135 'NOTES on a return' to a not-Forgotten : Durations of the missed and the previously unvisited
GEORGINA GUY
- 140 Running Time [artists' pages]
CHRIS SPEED & ANGELINA KARPOVICH
- 142 Reviews
- 148 Notes on Contributors



Front Cover: Barbara Campbell, detail, performance for night #1001 of *1001 nights cast*, 17/03/2008. Photo: Russell Emerson, © Barbara Campbell
Back Cover: Move 1 'Dan Graham's installation *Present Continuous Past(s)* at 'Move: Choreographing You', 2010. Photo: James Andrew Wilson

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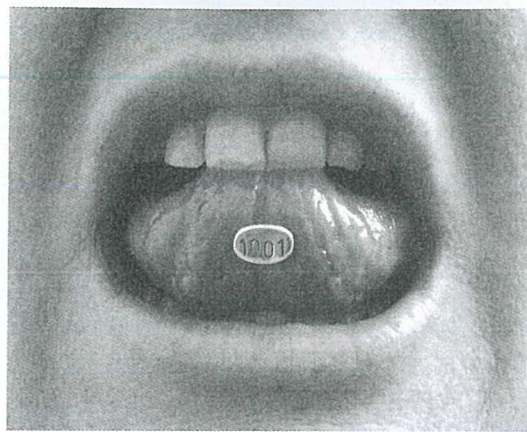


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Strange Attractors

Barbara Campbell's *1001 nights cast*

BRANISLAVA KUBUROVIĆ



'[T]ry to create memories' reads the phrase rendered in watercolour and used as the prompt for story #854 in the long series of relayed performances by the Australian artist Barbara Campbell which formed her *1001 nights cast* project.¹ I am struck by the phrase as I revisit the project's archive – the present and enduring form of this Internet-based durational work which Campbell originally performed as a series of 1,001 short text-based pieces, relayed via a live web stream at <http://1001.net.au>, always exactly at sunset, in a number of different locations, in an unbroken succession from 21 June 2005 to 17 March 2008.

As one of the many collaborating writers, my exchanges with the artist were anchored in just such watercoloured phrases, my writing spurred by a certain incongruity between the wealth of associations they seemed to offer, and their complex and irresolvable connections with concurrent news items from the Middle East. Once again, I find myself negotiating the very particular meaning this newly discovered phrase holds for me as I attempt to re-mark something about the project in its manifold relations to the notion of duration. Try to create memories. It is a plea, a gentle yet insistent impetus, so paradoxical that it could equally read as a demand. We do not usually think of memories as created. The prompt renders this possibility visible, almost inevitable. And this sudden awareness of something unexpected in the phrase becomes a point of departure for the imagination.

Prompts were one among several carefully selected structural devices that Campbell employed to frame and sustain the project over its extremely long duration. They were key visual and poetic markers in a series of strictly

timed daily tasks that the artist would set for herself and for the writer she would be collaborating with on each particular day. The days would begin with Campbell reading journalists' reports covering events in the Middle East in all of the morning papers available to her in her given location, selecting a phrase that leapt 'from the page with generative potential'² from one of the texts and then rendering that phrase in watercolour. She would then post the scanned image of the watercolour to the project's website, as well as sending it, together with the link to the article, to the participating writer to use as a prompt. The writer was free to draw (or not) from the given newspaper article to contribute a story of a maximum of 1001 words, written on the day, to be performed by the artist at sunset in her location. And she did so for 1001 nights.

The performative force of that initial leap of trust – 'She does so for 1001 nights'³ was the project's inaugural performative statement – in retrospect shows how the project generated its own sustenance through continually remaining with a precarious puncture in the present moment, the daily grind of working through a maze of press material, pulverizing it and extracting from it but a single poetic impulse, that simple watercolour phrase that became a dynamic imaginary frame, a poetic, personal remnant of all that went on in the overwhelming over-production of newsworthy language and from which fact could be sent across virtual space to be taken up by the writers and transformed into a shared fiction.

With its unrelenting demand on the artist and on the kind stranger, the project's performative force was perhaps most palpably measured by

¹ Story #854 was webcast from Sydney at 6:13 p.m. on 22 October 2007, using the source article by Lisa Foderaro, 'America's children of war learn how daddy died in Iraq', originally published in *The New York Times* and reprinted in *The Age online*, 22/10/07. The story was written by Ross Murray: <http://1001.net.au/story/854>.

² Cf. <http://1001.net.au/about/>

³ Introductory page for the *1001 nights cast* project: <http://1001.net.au/index.shtml>.

the growing community of writers it produced, for what began as a handful of collaborating writers by the end of the project included a total of 243 contributors from many different parts of the world and not all of us with English as our first language.

Campbell inaugurated the project into the anonymous virtual space of the Internet with both a testimonial and a narrative gesture. The opening page to the project states:

In a faraway land a gentle man dies.
His bride is bereft. She travels across continents
looking for a reason to keep living.
Every night at sunset she is greeted by
a stranger who gives her a story to
heal her heart and continue with her journey.
She does so for 1001 nights.⁴

⁴ Ibid.

How does a story heal a bereft heart? How does storytelling set out to accomplish such a task? There are no ready answers to these questions but for me the task stirred above all a need for a reciprocated gesture of a testimony. And yet that sense of exposure before the enormity of the narrator's stated loss, to which I felt compelled to respond, was immediately offset by an awareness that the ambiguity and rigorous placing of Campbell's testimonial address within the taxing formal rules of the project, and within the narrative envelope of fiction, protected me in that response from taking on board the enormity of any *fact* of tragic loss. Within the precariousness of that ongoing ambiguity, the project's collaborative leap of trust worked through a different gesture altogether, not through an investment in the arguably impossible task of understanding loss, but through the artist's willingness to step, however blindly, into that overwhelming space and invite the others to follow, so that together we could begin to weave a thread of that story to heal the heart.

Campbell's project thus never became any simple proliferation of testimony. Instead, its insistent, repetitive dynamic gradually created a shared space for a proliferation of a kind of lived fiction, a stream of instant episodes of storytelling. Its temporality had the complexity of a weave, marking the daily passage of time across a complex set of locations around the

globe. It wove together fact and fiction, through a laborious, continual insistence on the reported fact of the daily press articles, and its parallel undoing by the thread of storytelling.

The project's link to the Middle East at the time of the Western invasion of Iraq was another significant and equally charged point between fact and fiction in which Campbell placed her durational action. Easily taken to imply an uncomfortable mix of investment in the allure of the Arabian tales and a guilt-ridden attempt of a Western subject to do something in the situation of a war waged in its name in a foreign country, the thread of the news from the Middle East – I would like to argue – fulfilled a very different purpose and marked a different kind of investment in the project. It marked the project's highly particular engagement with loss, an entirely scheduled, scripted by others, prolonged, anticipated and hoped for movement into time from the 'perpetually present (no-time) and absent (no-space) dimension' (Pollock 2009: 46) of trauma of profound personal loss. Parallel to this process, another major humanitarian catastrophe was happening on a daily basis in Iraq, and was allowed to merge with the narrative thread, and with the artist's and the writers' daily lives which – like the daily lives of the majority of the project's virtual audiences – had no direct links with Iraq. Similar to the way traumatic remnants seem to act as strange attractors in that perpetually present and absent dimension of trauma that the cultural theorist Griselda Pollock writes about, it was through the insistent duration of the project and not through any offer of a resolution, that the project established its relation to the fact of war.

Strange attractors are a curious phenomenon of modern science, a point at which numeric information can be rendered as a non-linear dynamic image:

The strange attractor lives in the phase space, one of the most powerful inventions of modern science. Phase space gives a way of turning numbers into pictures, abstracting every bit of essential information from a system of moving parts, mechanical or fluid, and making a flexible road map to all its possibilities. (Gleick 1993: 134)

The placing of the complex structure of

Campbell's performance alongside the notion of the phase space may serve to activate in language the beautiful complexity of a non-linear dynamic weave of Campbell's unstable performance text, which can possibly also be said to have abstracted 'every bit of essential information from a system of moving parts' through a complex set of transformations. To achieve this, every aspect of the project was treated with equal care, from the artist's regular, insistent processing of the daily news, to the ensuing singular writerly and performative engagements with those facts, and their parallel interplay with the dynamic frame of the image, with the chosen watercolour phrase. The implication of an inevitable amount of blind guessing, of chance that any individual phrase attracted into the project, marked another significant aspect of this open process. In this way the project became an incessant notation, a notation that was then just a way of mapping a route as the artist and her distant collaborators were taking it, notation that remains fully incorporated in the very fibre of the duration of Campbell's performance, whether we describe it as the resulting archive still available online, or in more complex terms. Whichever way we choose to define the materiality of Campbell's performance text, the principle of its organization does not automatically assign value to any of its specific elements – either its purposefully ambiguous testimonial quality weaved with fiction, or the charged subject of the conflict in the Middle East – outside the complexity of their shared pattern over time. As a result of this, the project cast each fictive and/or redemptive gift as fragmentary and dependent upon a wider communal, durational action, on forces in excess of any singular narrative unity and closure.

The question of the adequacy of narrative memory in rendering loss is never simply a personal or an artistic one. Coming to terms with its painful discrepancy becomes especially urgent, yet precluded in the face of real and immediate danger of violence, where it operates as a political question, and where numerous unresolved or suppressed traumatic histories prove most susceptible to being heavily

exploited by politics. The widening gap between symbols and realities of broken societies call for different strategies for art to engage in the aftermaths of violence, when loss of symbolic links complicates any form of artistic intervention into the unmoored and volatile affectivity of societies which are no longer definable even as occupying a common space, where affectively no such however complexly shared space can be said to exist.

It is this particular susceptibility of the testimonial address to being overtaken by fiction – a susceptibility that can be both creatively engaged and viciously exploited – where I feel that *1001 nights cast* is especially poignant. Campbell's project proposes something about the possibilities of an artistic intervention into such affectively unmoored social symbolic space. Through its extreme duration and its leap of trust in the anonymous others to provide means for survival, the project performed a day-by-day process of making a community through the recovery of the old-fashioned gift of sharing stories, of its gradual shaping through layer upon layer of fiction built on the firm base of measured time and around the menacing thread of reported fact. To say that the Internet provides an unprecedented possibility for alternative social and political networks, especially in societies where power relies heavily on curbing alternative symbolic links that could spur dissent, is commonplace enough and increasingly obvious. But to animate that complex technological space through such an old technique of storytelling shows that the non-place of the Internet nonetheless can create an anchored communal space, and the duration of the project acted as just such an anchor. It also revealed what the symbolic stakes are in the building of a community, and how its continued existence is recreated daily through making sense with and for one another.

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