

“Retrospecting: *The Midday Movie and the History of Australian Painting*”
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I’m looking at the video tapes of Barbara Campbell’s solo work *The Midday Movie and the History of Australian Painting*, four years after the performance. Five tapes in an archive box. The first I pick up is labelled ‘Midday Movie: ‘Waco Siege’ (movie shown during performance)’. I put it to one side, thinking that I might take it home to have a look. Three other tapes are ominously marked ‘unedited footage’ and ‘Master’; three different angles: ‘Wide shot’, ‘Cross Camera Position’ and ‘Overhead LX Bar’. On the last tape, the whole story: ‘Barbara Campbell “The Midday Movie + The History of Australian Painting” 1997; performance excerpts (4min 45sec)’. That’s the one I start with.

I’m staging my own little retrospective. I catch sight of my shoes at the bottom of a shot taken from the overhead camera; the cross-camera angle more or less reproduces my own viewing position back then. It captures, at the top of the frame, beyond this supine body, its head hidden beneath a wicker basket-like object (a nipple visible through the macramé dress), two of my friends sitting/who sat opposite me for the performance. I take the video into another machine, this time moving the whole apparatus into the studio where the performance took place, and, not at all feeling silly, take up the same position in the room, the television monitor more or less exactly in the same location taken by (this same?) screen four and a half years ago. Now in fast forward, I watch their responses to the work: the subtle choreography of their bodies emphasized as time is compressed, their apparent autonomy betrayed, their dance with each other now apparent as the long rhythms of the artist’s work set up even deeper, tidal rhythms, surging through this delicate pas de deux. It is mesmerizing.

I’m meeting with Barbara, talking about the piece. She’s worried: I’m too interested in the Waco film. Next time the work is performed, she tells me, it will be a different midday movie, so I ought not to make too big a deal out of it (except that, I argue back, I can only write of the performance as I experienced it—or continue to re-experience it—not as it might otherwise be experienced, not with any other movie, not in terms of a hypothetical different performance. Besides, writing now—dare I type it?—‘post September 11th’, the film, with its heroicizing of wholesome all-American paramilitary troops storming a citadel of fundamentalists, is sickly compelling¹).

Interpretation

More on that later; first, another retrospective lead to follow. Someone—alright, it was me—has left a marginal note in the McCarthy: a cross-reference to an essay—one of my favourites—by Samuel Weber, an essay that perhaps also participates in the tenor of McCarthy’s dystopian western (hence the cross-reference), an essay in which Weber burrows into the question of interpretation, an essay formative in my own approach to watching and engaging with art in general, and performance in particular.

Weber starts out with a brief passage from an essay by Derrida in *Writing and Difference*, an essay “that was soon to become a classic of contemporary criticism”, a passage, Weber warns us, which addresses a distinction “that has doubtless become familiar, indeed all too familiar”. The distinction is that between the “sad, nostalgic, guilty, Rousseauistic face” of interpretation as a practice oriented towards *uncovering*—which “dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin that transcends play and the order of the sign”, and an alternative, post-Nietzschean version of interpretation: a practice that no longer orients itself towards origin, but embraces the “joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming”.²

Weber is right: this is, by now, familiar. We no longer try to find *the* meaning of a performance—particularly performances as confounding, quirky, idiosyncratic, intertextual, as those created by, say, Barbara Campbell. Instead, in terms of the distinction offered by Derrida, we are more likely to take flight alongside the artist, playfully producing meanings, and more than likely (if we are polite, at least) accommodating responses dissonant with our own, ceding each others’ ‘right’ to make of these dense, polysemous art objects and practices what each of us wants. Or, perhaps, of which each of us is capable.

So, writes a critic of an earlier Campbell work:

The performance invites the viewer either to drift from the realm of imagination to that of actuality—or to experience both without ever being able to draw a clear line between them emphasise(s) the interrelation of the material and the conceptual as a means of constructing new narratives . . . Energy is redirected away from the task of explaining the world—or of creating a form where the pattern provides a meaning felt to be lacking in reality—to that of creating (not necessarily authenticating) an experience.³

Here, meaning (‘the sad, Rousseuistic face . . .’) is displaced in favour of experience (‘the joyful affirmation . . .’). An audience—in fact, each member of an audience—has one: an experience (we might even fantasise about them all having the same one). In the spirit of ‘play’, perhaps, these experiences are not ‘authenticated’, but ‘resonate’ (a word frequently appearing in reviews of Campbell’s work); instead, the ‘viewer’ (are they just ‘viewing?’) drifts, floats around, never having to commit to a, or any, meaning, to anything at all. Accordingly, the artist is conceived of as the facilitator of experience, perhaps: appropriating, resisting, combining, inter-relating, juxtaposing, weaving (another word recurring in Campbell-reviews, and, as we will see below, particularly appositely in terms of this particular performance).

Weber’s claim, however, is that Derrida’s positing of these competing versions of what interpretation is, or does, is itself an interpretative move. Derrida presents a choice, and is happy to allow his readers to identify the joyously affirmative, playful interpretation-as-becoming with the name ‘Nietzsche’ (‘cette deuxième interprétation de l’interprétation, dont Nietzsche nous indiqué la voie’, Weber quotes).

A closer attention to Nietzsche, however, Weber suggests, reveals a far less innocent understanding of interpretation:

Everything that exists, that has somehow come to be, is repeatedly reinterpreted in terms of new aims by a power superior to it, is repeatedly taken hold of, transformed and transposed to new ends; . . . *all* processes in the organic world entail overpowering and domination, which in turn constitute new interpretation, manipulation, in the course of which the previous “meaning” and “purpose” are necessarily obscured or entirely eradicated.⁴

This is the *Realpolitik* of interpretation: interpretation as contest, displacing, manipulating, staking claims. The corollary of the position being put here is that the second interpretation of interpretation, in affirming its ‘playfulness’, its open-ness, its refusal of a search for ‘the’ meaning of a text or performance, is in fact dissimulating; that is, it is denying its own complicity in a less than innocent game, the stakes of which involve, primarily, the establishing of the authority of the critical voice.⁵

Why me?

An anxiety, born of the problem of writing about a performance so apparently ‘open to interpretation’. Why me? Because I was there? Only that? Or because I know Barbara (although only through her work)? Or because I can quote Weber, Derrida, Nietzsche? Maybe I am expected to write authoritatively, with a knowledge of the history of performance art and contemporary performance; perhaps I recognize the intertextualities in Barbara’s work, pointing the reader towards . . . Barbara’s intention? Or perhaps I could write about what it meant to *me* . . . how I, with all this vast con-/inter-/sub-/para-textual knowledge, this mass of cognition and feeling, experienced this work?

I am, then, in the first instance, caught between the two interpretations of interpretation: I neither want to tell you what Barbara or the performance meant, nor do I want to affirm, in the place of the corpse of the late author, my own will to interpretation. More importantly, however, I am haunted by the spectre of the third interpretation of interpretation: interpretation as force, as the simulation of open-ness which, in fact, occludes; which bashes readers over the head with erudition and knowing, which stakes a claim and obfuscates, erecting complication and cleverness where there is . . . what?

What was there

A woman (I know to be Barbara Campbell) is lying on a blue carpet extending the length of the studio next to which I work. She is wearing a short, macramé dress, through which her skin and the contours of her body are visible. Her legs sometimes cross, forwards and back. From the shoulders up she is obscured by a large wicker construction, as tall as her body is long on the floor. This construction is sinuous, shapely: a bottle, or an archetypal female form, swelling and nipped in at the waist, hooped with lateral bands. At standing

eye-level, the vertical lengths of wicker sprout freely—the basket, whatever it is, appears unfinished. The woman—I know her to be Barbara—is lying with her head inside it.

Beyond her outstretched feet, a single television monitor hovers about two metres above the floor, its wall mounting masked by the purple drapes furnishing the studio. Either side of the blue carpet, there is a row of chairs. Behind one row is a video camera on a tripod (I sat in front of and under the camera, determined not to have my own spectatorship documented). Spectators come and go, observing the doubled etiquette of performance art and/university department: some take notes, very few talk, all look suitably serious.

A small electric bar radiator stands on the carpet, to one side of the woman's body. Every few minutes, another woman walks onto the carpet, and moves the radiator to the other side of the prostrate body, casting a faint, roseate blush on the exposed flesh of her legs. Half the time the power cord feeding the radiator snakes across the carpet, disrupting the neat symmetry of the set-up. Is this important? Do I ignore it, airbrushing it out of my experience?

A voice is reciting a text; it sounds like an art history textbook (of course, it is: but how do we know that?). The voice is Barbara's (but once again, how do we—I—know that?). It feels a bit like doing an audio tour in a gallery, but without moving and, of course, without the paintings. There's biography and flourishes of description—but it's also kind of . . . boring. Dusty, lifeless, pallid. We know that it is Barbara, but the voice is disembodied, issuing from the top of the basket object. The reading stops, and the body's right forearm flexes: she is holding a remote control, which she points at the television monitor hovering beyond her toes (she is, it seems, in an attitude of strange obeisance to this object, looming, blank faced at the end of the carpet). The screen flickers into life (there is no avoiding that particular cliché), and the midday movie crashes into the studio. We're back from the commercial break: the subscript text at the bottom of the frame identifies the film, the station, the fact that it is midday.

And of course, the focus of everyone in the room—you really notice this on the documentation tape—snaps to the screen; these devices have us very well trained. We're watching the movie, sort of involved—I certainly was—but at the same time, aware of the very strangeness of this artefact. The rush of the montage, the shorthands for establishing conflict, character, the grammar of set piece and episode. I'm wondering about how we watch these crappy, made-for-TV movies (complete with featured appearance by recognisable sit-com star: it's the father from *The Wonder Years*, isn't it . . . haven't seen much of him lately . . . wow, his career's going nowhere . . . but I'm distracted), how my own attention oscillates between suspension of disbelief and . . . disbelief.

I see the manufacture of tension, a rush of underscore, a crescendo of cuts into close-up, and I'm right in there, dragged forward by the momentum of telemovie-making at its most transparent, its most engrossing, and I'm asking—my whole being is straining with—the very question this artefact is designed to make me ask: what's going to happen next . . . ?

And the movie disappears, a voice floats out of the top of the basket: more art history, an evocation of other worlds' preoccupations—the world of a crew of artists and their desire to interpret alien landscapes; another world of art historians and their desire to interpret those artists . . . We all shift in our seats, negotiate our attention, tune ourselves to the rhythms: the ejaculatory drive of 90 minute plot juxtaposed to the sameness, the timelessness of the reading. We know the former will exhaust itself within the logics of the genre: “The Midday Movie”; the latter, we suspect—fear?—could last forever, or at least as long as it would take to read every art history book on every shelf in every library in the world.

Sure enough, the movie ends, the lights go down, and when they come back up, there is no body on the floor. We clap, some giggle, and, strangest thing of all, almost everyone walks up to the wicker thing to touch it, to peek inside.

How very, very strange.

And afterwards?

The afterwards, of course, keeps happening: again and again. And each time, it—the work itself, my recollection of the work, your recollection of the work, and, even better, my very self—is, and will be, the same as it was, only different.

¹ Even more compelling: on the video tape, ten minutes of news reportage of “the death of a princess”: *Waco* had screened two days after Lady Di's fatal car crash.

² Samuel Weber “Texts/Contexts: Closure and Exclusion” in *Institution and Interpretation* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987]: 3

³ Sarah Miller, catalogue entry for Barbara Campbell's “Backwash”, *Australian Perspectives* 1993 [Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales]: 14.

⁴ Weber, op cit, 4, quoting his own translation from *The Genealogy of Morals* in Friedrich Nietzsche, *Werke II* [Munich: Hanser 1960]: 818

⁵ And now the ‘familiarity’ Weber assumes we share with Derrida's writing, with the French he quotes, untranslated, reveals itself as part of the game of interpretation: do we know enough to play with Weber? Are we prepared to play the game by his rules?