Flesh Winnow & the Rhetoric of the Pose [1]
Sarah Miller

Each year a postcard arrives: a portrait of artist Barbara Campbell "photographed" – as I read recently – "in various incarnations since 1983".[2] 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 sensuous…",[3] 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, *Cocking a Snook*, so carefully established by Barbara in 1991, I can assure you that the action of taking the photograph, whilst 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? More than a decade later whilst I remember my mixed feelings of responsibility and trust and the experience as funny if slightly worrisome. Writing today, I am far less certain of the relationship between my experience in shooting that single image and their accumulation over nearly twenty 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

---

[1] The title (in part) is taken from a Craig Owens essay on the "rhetoric of the pose" in the work of Barbara Kruger; "The Medusa Effect or, The Spectacular Ruse", *Art in America* 72 (January 1984), p104, quoted in Henry M. Sayre, The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde since 1970 (University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London, 1989), p52.

[2] Quoted from the catalogue published in conjunction with the exhibition, "How Say You", curated by Kevin Murray, (Australian Centre for Contemporary Art: Melbourne, 1996), p21.

[3] Barbara Campbell, programme note, *Carmen (privately)*, 1989.

ongoing analysis and meticulous investigation of diverse histories and theories. In talking about her 1991 performance, *The Diamond Necklace Affair*, Campbell argued that "it is almost impossible to comprehend history as truth"[4] 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 and not only in terms of the conflictual 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 *imposture* as the condition of portraiture".[6] 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 what we see is a *tableau vivant* that its characters have chosen to perform."[7] Thus I want to argue, that the postcards, whilst the smallest if perhaps most persistent of her works, are in a sense emblematic.

The recurrence of terms like duplicity, artifice, masquerade and imposture 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 duplicit. Whilst Campbell's work has never been didactic, there is no doubt that her performances were informed by the feminist art practices of the early eighties and that in one 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

---

[4] Taped interview with Barbara Campbell quoted in Anne Marsh, *Body and Self: Performance Art in Australia 1969–92* (Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1993), p220. *Body and Self* includes a discussion on two of Campbell's works, *The Diamond Necklace Affair* (1991) and *Cries from the Tower* (1992).

[5] "*Sécateur*", p?.

[6] Craig Owens quoted by Henry M. Sayre, op. cit. p52.

[7] Roland Barthes quoted by Henry M. Sayre, op. cit.

female artist, Campbell's presumably triply developed "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, "rarely satisfies 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 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,[9] carefully embroidered – in three languages – one of the casket letters of Mary Queen of Scots.[10] She has – if not precisely danced - skipped endlessly.[11] She has engraved images onto acrylic,[12] typed multiple copies of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* onto rice paper.[13] She has employed props and utilised 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".[14]

For ten years, the substance of Campbell's performance art was largely concerned with the ways in which women – whether fictional or historical, mythological or everyday – inhabited, however peripherally, the popular imagination. From Ariadne[15] to Arachne,[16] Mary Queen of Scots[17] and Marie Antoinette,[18] Lizzie Borden,[19] Tokyo Rose,[20] Patty Hearst,[21] Carmen,[22] Gracie

---

[8] Barbara Campbell, "Trukanini in Extenso", Master of Visual Arts Research Paper (Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney, 1998), p72.

[9] *Fleas* or *The Menses of Lizzie Borden*, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Sydney (1994), as part of *Twenty Five Years of Performance Art in Australia*
Whilst many of Campbell's performances have been performed more than once, generally I refer either to the original presentation or to the version that I witnessed in Sydney.

[10] *Cries from the Tower*, ABC Ultimo Centre, Sydney (1992) as part of the *Third International Symposium of Electronic Arts (TISEA)*

[11] *The Diamond Necklace Affair*, Pier 4/5, Sydney (1991) as part of the Artspace Exhibition for *Dissonance – Frames of reference: Aspects of Feminism and Art*

[12] *Fresh Glories,* National Portrait Gallery, Canberra (1997), as part of *Archives and the Everyday*

[13] *Backwash,* Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney (1993), as part of *Australian Perspecta 1993*

[14] Campbell, loc. cit.

[15] *Ariadne's Trace*, The Performance Space Galleries, Sydney (1990)

[16] *Loom of Arachne*, The Malthouse Theatre, Melbourne (1990) as part of Experimenta and First Draft West, Sydney (1991)

[17] *Cries from the Tower*, op. cit.

[18] *The Diamond Necklace Affair*, op. cit.

Silcox,[23] Eleanor Coppola,[24] Julia Margaret Cameron[25] and Trukanini,[26] Campbell's forensic approach to historical, literary and visual evidence weaves together, recasts 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". [27]

Campbell's research into any one of these women, whilst 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",[28] for example, the embroidery on Mary Queen of Scots' skirt, the manually typed text for *Backwash* or the carved soap sculptures for *The Menses of Lizzie Borden*. In any Barbara Campbell performance you can be sure that each item will have been carefully chosen for its aural, visual, physical 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.[29] Such opacity should not be understood as wilfully obscurantist 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 induces us, her audience, to imagine, to think beyond familiar parameters, to experience her performances "on both a sensual and intellectual level." [30]

The culmination of this body of work came with *Fresh Glories*, a performance presented as part of the exhibition, *Archives and the Everyday* and designed for the

---

[19] *Fleas*, op. cit.
[20] *Zero Hour*, Domain Theatre, Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney (1996) as part of *Matinaze*
[21] *I have been given the name Tania*, Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts (1995),
[22] *Carmen (privately)*, Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney (1989); *Carmen (prelude)*, First Draft Gallery, *Sydney (1988)*
[23] *Backwash*, op. cit.
[24] *Backwash*, op. cit.
[25] *Fresh Glories*, op. cit.
[26] *Fresh Glories*, op. cit.
[27] Campbell, op. cit. p81
[28] "*Cloche*", p?
[29] In developing *Fleas* or *The Menses of Lizzie Borden*, Campbell, created an elaborate, fictional history for Lizzie Borden, in which she presents her as fascinated by technical ("how to") books and periodicals about the latest inventions. This of course reflects Campbell's own fascination for idiosyncratic knowledges, unusual artefacts and 'how to' manuals. Campbell's reference for this performance was the "How to do it" book, Series no 22, *Soap Carving: Cinderella of Sculpture* by Lester Gaba, as cited in *Twenty five years of Performance Art in Australia* (Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Sydney 1994), p23. See also, Campbell's interpolations into Joan Grounds' essay on *Remanence* for a description of "how to" create "glow pictures".
[30] Campbell, loc. cit.

National Portrait Gallery in Canberra where it was presented in 1997. *Fresh Glories* took as its starting point "the photographically preserved face of a once living human being",[31] 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 Riawunna 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".[32]

Whilst the relationship between subject and object in portraiture is a long and troubled one, the circulation of staged portraits and images of Trukanini have functioned 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 *Paris Match* cover showing a black soldier saluting the French flag, the image in these cases becomes part and parcel of an unstated but systematic effort to promulgate a colonial myth. "It is a consummate act of *bad faith*…."[33] 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 dissociated 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 assemblage 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 practice. As Campbell has noted, "it led her to review the assumption that she was free to pursue the subject of her choice."[34] On the one hand, this has led her to look more closely, at the specifics of her own family history as, for example, in the works *Sécateur* and *Remanence*, leading her perhaps to a stronger consideration of aspects of the particular Australian identity and context, from within which she creates her performances. As Joan Kerr articulates in her essay

[31] Campbell, op. cit. p1
[32] Campbell, op. cit. p7
[33] Roland Barthes, Mythologies, trans. Annette Lavers (Hill & Wang, New York, 1972), pp116–20, paraphrased by Sayre, op. cit. p53
[34] Campbell, op. cit. p81

on *The Machine, oiled again,* [35] it also allows her 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."[36] This preoccupation, however, has persisted throughout Campbell's performance oeuvre. From the outset, whether it was the early performance, *The Seduction of Art*, [37] 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* (1983), *Late Modernist* (1996), or *The Return of Cubism* (2000), Campbell has testified to the many selves which speak before the modernist art object.

Even the title of this survey, *Flesh Winnow*, 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*, itself a pun on the form of the work, a french window. 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".[38] It is a work about mourning, an emotionally precise evocation of those experiences 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: *Inflorescent* and *The Machine, oiled again,* the latter, among other things, being a deliberate conversation with Duchamp's *The Large Glass*. Not only does *Inflorescent* similarly address the performative 'rhetoric of the pose', but by inserting the live body of the nude female artist into the anthropological space of the Macleay Museum, forces the viewer, to approach it (the object) differently; insists on its status as both living 'flesh' and as 'Art'. The ploy 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.[39]

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 alternative, 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.

---

[35] "Performing Art History: *The Machine, Oiled Again*", p?

[36] ibid. p??

[37] The Seduction of Art with Ted Riggs, One Flat Exhibit, Brisbane (1982); Later performed at the Performance Space Gallery, Sydney (1986); with Yuji Sone at the Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Sydney (1993), with Peter Anderson at the Brisbane City Hall Gallery (1996) and with Neil Roberts at the National Gallery of Australia (1998).

[38] Anne d'Harnoncourt and Kynaston McShine (eds), *Marcel Duchamp*, Museum of Modern Art and Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1973, p291.

[39] See particularly Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood" *Artforum* 5 (June 1967); rpt in Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology, ed. Gregory Battock (Dutton, New York, 1968) and Clement Greenberg,"Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in *Art and Culture* (Beacon Press, Boston, 1961).

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 *Flesh Winnow* as the title for this current survey, seems to speak to all those 'other' histories, by not only acknowledging her historical debt to Duchamp, but 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 identified throughout Campbell's work, resonates with each essayist in this publication. Clare Grant writing on *Cloche*, identifies not only the "disquieting mingling of the public and private…" but the movement from "voyeurism" to "a level of anxiety", whilst Mary Roberts writing on *Inflorescent* describes how, "[u]p close, it felt as if we had crossed an invisible barrier without permission." Campbell of course not only constructs the barrier but also establishes the potential for transgression. In her subversion of art historical precepts, as Joan Kerr enjoyably notes, in *The Machine, oiled again*, Campbell plays with notions of a conventional art historical education and "the slide test from Hell… the slide test everyone fails". Ian Maxwell performs the anxiety of the spectator, writer, critic and authoritative voice, positioning us all - artist, spectator, critic and writer alike - as participants in a "less than innocent game". Rather differently, artist Joan Grounds writing on *Remanance* and artist/writer Anne Brennan on *Sécateur*, articulate their own associative practices, focussing 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, five under the aegis of the Department of Performance Studies, and one for Sydney College of the Arts. Of these works, the only one I have seen is *Remanence*, the work concerning her grandfather, dowsing and the hard science of geomagnetism. As with photographic or video evidence, reading Joan Grounds' 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 detail 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 in order 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 evidenced 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, to generate complex historical parallels between past and present, between authorised and unauthorised systems of knowledge and in her unwavering ethical commitment to content as form, to create performances that are both vital and necessary.