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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.¹

So reads the preface to Barbara Campbell's durational work, *1001 nights cast*, performed every day for close to three years, at 33 different places across seven countries. Every morning, the artist would read the news coverage on the Middle East, choose a particularly resonant word or phrase, and render it in watercolour before posting it online. Every day, she would contact a writer from an ever-growing international network to respond to that prompt by mid-afternoon in up to 1001 words of prose. And every evening, right on sunset, she would read the story aloud, webcasting in real time to the world, the video a close-up of her mouth set off by a silver tongue-stud inscribed with the number of each unique performance.

The work draws on the well-known tale from *The Arabian nights*, where a young bride deploys her story-telling prowess to fend off her husband's murderous intent: for 1001 nights, Scheherazade keeps the despot on tenterhooks, dying to hear what happens next, thus guaranteeing she survives until the next day and eventually earning permanent reprieve.

Campbell's performance is also one of everyday survival through the power of story, as she sought a way to tether herself to the world in the wake of devastating personal tragedy. The artist designed a daily ritual, balancing her focus between suffering on a global scale and the intimate processes of making; between creative collaboration and digitally dispersed yet embodied performance. The words she fished from daily newspaper reports on the Middle East and transformed into tiny paintings—'cannot speak fluently', 'failed to keep in touch', 'such blaming', 'to steel the will', 'all the massed obstacles', 'a frozen smile', 'a toothless grin', 'a bloody knife', 'holes in the fence'—served to re-contextualise narratives and so affirm the personal nature of the political.

In following simple rules and becoming accountable to a newly formed community invested in her regular presence, the artist found powerful tools of survival. She likened the process of giving and receiving the stories to 'hand to hand resuscitation': 'if I'm alive during this performance, then you too must be alive, watching and listening'.² Art became proof of life.

Like all of Campbell's performance work, *1001 nights cast* is an erudite and sensuous gathering of body, philosophy and cultural zeitgeist, always anchored in feminist bedrock. Yet this work's entangled and widely dispersed authorship and audience, coupled with the existential viscosity at its heart, renders it one of Campbell's most significant.

JACQUELINE MILLNER

1. Barbara Campbell quoted on the *1001 nights cast* website at 1001.net.au, accessed 18 November 2019.
2. Campbell in conversation with Cynthia Troup: 'The art of performance: Online and alive', *RealTime*, no 73, June–July 2006, p30.