

# The art of performance: online and alive

A conversation between Barbara Campbell and Cynthia Troup about *1001 nights cast*



Artist Barbara Campbell describes *1001 nights cast* as "a durational performance." It began on June 21, 2005, and will continue until March 18, 2008. Each morning she seeks out newspaper reportage on the Middle East; chooses a phrase from a current story and uploads it with its citation details to 1001.net.au the project website. She may email the phrase directly to a particular writer who has agreed to generate a response to this "prompt" as a short story before sunset (Campbell's local time). At the appointed time, she performs the new story in a video broadcast of 5 minutes or so via the website.

At the time of this interview, I had contributed on 5 occasions to *1001 nights cast*. On August 21, 2005 staying back in my office at work in Melbourne, I wrote anxiously through the winter night to submit my first story for broadcast at sunset in Paris (Campbell's location at the time). Prior to the performance (number 62), several emails flew between Paris and Melbourne concerning the story—details of pronunciation, feedback, reassurance. The noiseless, paperless effort to meet Campbell's deadline was intense, necessarily collaborative, involving concentrated energy and candour. The atmosphere and anonymity of the darkness outside lent the experience a faintly dreamlike quality.

On April 28, 2006 at Casey House in East Melbourne, I met with Campbell to speak about the imperative of *1001 nights cast*; its imagery, logic, and trajectory so far. Earlier she had posted prompt number 312, "war of words."

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When I first accessed *1001 nights cast* to watch the story-telling at sunset, I was surprised by the choice of frame for the video, centred on the image of the mouth in close-up. I'd anticipated a performance "scene", providing a more descriptive context. The image clearly challenges romantic notions of the female storyteller, for example, as a source of consolation and positive fantasy.

In my mind the project is very much about the West's conception of the Middle East, through its reference to the original text of the *Thousand and One Nights*. What we see when we look at any version of it is really ourselves; the West's own conception of itself in relation to the Middle East. We often picture the Middle East through the purdah, specifically through the woman's veil and what is fostered by that piece of clothing: a mystery of the eyes. We love to conceptualise the Middle East in terms of this particularly feminine image. The Western corol-

lary to that theatre of the eyes is a theatre of the mouth. The West is always speaking on behalf of someone else—

—invading on behalf of someone else?

At the diplomatic extreme, yes. We're so comfortable imagining what other people should be doing, and whether we articulate this in spoken words or written words, it forever seems to be about words and speaking. When presenting such a severe image of the storyteller, I hope that *1001 nights cast* will at least encourage the question 'why?' To have the question always present is important to the work.

So the choice of frame for the video is conceptual, and an effect: if you think of the mouth as an eroticised space, then what's the difference between that kind of eroticised space, which seems to be so open, viscous and corporeal, compared to the eroticised space of the theatre of the eyes, which seems to be about mystery and denial and 'closedness'?

There's another, practical reason for the choice of frame. When I have a story to tell every day I can't possibly memorise it, and I don't want the audience to see that my eyes are scanning a text, to be distracted by the realisation that I'm reading. My reading needs to have a more invisible aspect.

Following the broadcast, the stories will be accessible in the 1001.net.au archive as text, but you're especially interested in what happens when the stories are narrated—

told—

—told in real time, through the camera and the Quicktime streaming server.

Obviously there's a difference between the stories as texts and as performances. If I have a role, it's simply that of the storyteller. I am a channel, if you like, for these stories to pass through. They come through me from the writer to the audience.

As you describe it there's a ritual aspect to your role. The live storytelling at sunset is the culmination of a set of connections. These are digital connections, literally, but also connections with journalists' reportage on the Middle East through which you create the prompt and the connections of relationship with a writer or writers, who take up the prompt to compose a story. In a way, the performance is an affirmation and a release from the hold of such connections with the wider world. Each day is a miniature cycle of the larger cycle of your project over nearly 3 years. At that level, and in the classical sense, it could be understood as a cathartic effort, to ensure refreshment for the next day.

As well, in the ritual of broadcasting there seems to be a motivation to try to guarantee others' connection with the poetic of the prompt and the resultant story.

Yes, the story's not just told, but 'told at a certain time.' The 'certain time' comes back to the fact of my being alive. The whole project is set up as a survival story: that we are in fact alive has to be proved again and again. This is why people can see the video only as it's happening—why the live moment can't be accessed after it's passed. I've refused to archive the broadcasts, not just for technological reasons, but very much for conceptual reasons. My audience will just have to wait to be assured that I'm still there the next day. I hope that some sort of

transference happens then: if I'm alive doing this performance, then you too must be alive, watching and listening. *1001 nights cast* is about the things that bind us to this world. All of us constantly have to make this mutual commitment to keep ourselves here.

It seems that each day is an experiment with the potential of the internet to witness human connectivity through presence. You're opening out the definition of presence to embrace the technologies in real time, and in conjunction with real time.

That's true. The importance of the telling of the tale probably has much to do with the fact that I've been a performer of live works to live audiences for the last 20 years. From this perspective, to pull back so far as to become almost completely invisible is a big change for me. I did want to test the limits of the 'liveness' of this medium, one which gives an impression of being quite 'cold.' When there's always the computer screen, what kind of a trace of the corporeal can there be?

In relation to your theme of survival, the mouth frequently serves as an image for consumption. From its beginnings, *1001 nights cast* has involved structuring your time and place of residence around its parameters: thus far, have there been occasions when you've felt consumed by the project? Perhaps by the thought of its duration until March 2008?

Honestly, no. Fairly early on, maybe after the first 100 nights, I felt that in fact I had consumed it; that it was now completely incorporated within me.

You'd adjusted your physiology to its demands?

Yes, it genuinely lives inside me somehow. My other image of the project is that of a home, as such, it could actually precede me. It could always exist as a home-space, and one that I could inhabit quite comfortably rather than drag around like a burden.

By 'it' I mean the timeframe and the connection with the writer or writers on any particular day. There can be emotional aspects, depending on where I put my mind. For instance, I might be very aware of the writer's constraints; she or he might be up at 1am on the east coast of America trying to submit a story.

Of course the project doesn't consume all my waking hours, but at the point when I send him or her the prompt I fall into the writer's space and when the deadline is approaching, to some extent I'm with the writer then too. That we do meet up somewhere in an undefined space is actually the traditional conception of cyberspace.

The tongue stud is the other aspect of the project that I carry around. I got this piercing for the *1001 nights cast* because I wanted to have something in my body, my mouth, that would change me physically in the task of performing the story. Actually, the stud is quite a challenge to wear.

Because of the discomfort of the intrusion?

Yes, the tongue in particular wants to heal itself quickly, all the time, and I do feel like I'm struggling with it. By retaining this piercing, I'm preventing myself from healing.

There's an irony in that, since the website explicitly introduces *1001 nights cast* as a project

for healing across time. This is conveyed, for example, by the line "Every night at sunset she is greeted by a stranger who gives her a story to heal her heart and continue with her journey." And indeed by the first story.

I recognise the irony, or contradiction.

Yet perhaps in the broadest sense you'll be aware of the healing process in relation to healing that's not occurring as well. The tongue stud is like your own daily prompt to yourself, to observe the change; maintain awareness.

It certainly is an awareness, and the most physical aspect of the project as I live it.

Your readers are immediately encouraged to imagine the heritage of the *Thousand and One Nights* and to cleave to the mythological space. However, during the project's first year, you've been personalising your rapport with the writers, especially through cultivating a sense of collegiality, if not friendship, with many who submit stories. Obviously this doesn't preclude the mythologisation of self, but your approach appears to be much more about cultivating authenticity of self in relationships, rather than pursuing the potential of the internet for masquerade.

That's interesting, yes. Regarding my relationship with the writers, I don't question the projection of the authentic self—"authentic" is a problematic word of course. It simply seems to be part of the contract that I don't dissemble to these people. I continually recognise the incredibly generous commitment that they make to the project. I think that the least I can do is be as honest as possible with them, at every moment.

This impulse comes back to the realisation that I'm playing to two distinct groups. One group is the writers, with whom I consciously propagate a personal relationship. I want them to feel that they're part of something much bigger and ongoing; that they've knitted themselves into a global community of writers. And there is the community of the audience. I'm happy for the audience to remain at a distance from the more personal background and process and for them to remain in that compelled questioning mode, asking, 'how much of this is real?'

Cynthia Troup is a Melbourne-based historian, writer and a member of the Aphids team.



Barbara Campbell

images by Glen Stace