

Art

INCONVERSATION

JIM CAMPBELL with Constance Lewallen

by Constance Lewallen

Constance Lewallen (Rail): I want to begin by asking you to describe your installation for Madison Square Park this fall. I assume “Exploded View (Birds)” is a prototype.

Jim Campbell: Yes, it is, but the story is a little more complicated. I had an idea for exploding an image, take a two-dimensional image and make it in three dimensions. My gallery [Todd Hosfelt] was between shows so I could use it for three days. I experimented by filling a large gallery with light bulbs to see if it was feasible. Even though you couldn't get far enough away to see it properly, I then knew that the idea would work as a large scale, outdoor, interactive experience. What you see here is a small prototype.

Rail: You are also going to do a similar piece at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in their atrium?

Campbell: Yes, but in November 2011, after the Madison Square Park installation.

Rail: If I am not wrong this is one of the first times you have moved to three dimensions.

Campbell: Yes.

Rail: It seems to be a big step. Some of the theoretical, cinematic issues that come up in your wall-mounted work don't seem to apply here.

Campbell: It's true. One of the things I experiment with when I am working with new technologies is what kind of images work. That's still what I am trying to figure out for Madison Square Park. For example, here, in the prototype, I used an image of birds but imagine this 10 times as big; the birds would be over six feet, so birds won't work. I am going to work with figures, which will be life size.



Image provided by the artist

Rail: What will the energy source be?

Campbell: Recently, an artist did a work that involved light bulbs in Madison Square Park, which necessitated having a semi-truck generator on site for two months to run the bulbs. I am going to have more lights, but by taking apart 2000 light bulbs and inserting LEDs in each (because I want the visual of the light bulb but not the power of the light bulb). We will be able to run this large, 50 by 20 by 20 foot piece on two electrical circuits.

Rail: Tell me where the bird imagery in the prototype came from.

Campbell: I tried half a dozen images before arriving at the solution. When I was in Bombay I came upon a scene with birds that I had had in my head for about five years—I had been waiting for this. Can you see the birds are landing on the bottom plane? They just kept taking off and landing, dozens of them, like a dance, and they continued for a long time. The image works with the technology because this work is about volume, about air, not about a surface. It's anti-gravity, like birds, and, therefore, the birds are appropriate for this piece. But it's a little pretty for me.

Rail: When you conceive a new work, does the technology always come first?

Campbell: Not always. For example, the work that I did for the MATRIX program at the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum in 2003 called "Last Day in the Beginning of March" was not motivated by technology. I had the technology, and I wanted to do a work about a heavy topic for me: my brother's suicide. I would say half the time the image comes first and half the time it's the technology. Generally, when I have a totally new technology, I play with it. For example, I can plug in other images for the "Exploded Image" prototype so you can see what the Madison Square Park installation might look like with figures.

Rail: A running man.

Campbell: Yes, the original LED work I made in 2000. I can also plug in the Grand Central Station footage with many figures shot from above—that's probably what I will use.

Rail: It changes the piece, doesn't it?

Campbell: Yes, it does.

Rail: That light, ethereal feeling you have watching the birds take off and land is absent here. You recycle these older images into new technology?

Campbell: Yes, I learned that from Nam June Paik. [Laughter]

Rail: Is this the biggest piece you will have made?

Campbell: Oh, yes.

Rail: Are you confident that it's going to work?

Campbell: Well, if this were ten years ago I would hesitate, but all of the times I doubted in the past have turned out well. And, we are doing a lot of tests.

Rail: What happens in bad weather?

Campbell: Two of my assistants are picking up a freezer so we can test it frozen. We already tested it in a bucket of water, and it worked; now we have to test for wet and frozen. I think the strands holding the LEDs will tangle and the Madison Square Conservancy staff will have to untangle them once a week and they are fine with it. If it were permanent, it wouldn't work; I would have to redesign it.

Rail: How do you see this piece in terms of your work in general? Do you see it leading to other three-dimensional pieces?

Campbell: I feel like this technology is limited in the content that I can overlay on to it. As a work it's more about its sculptural aspect than about its content. In some other works, like say "Home Movies (300-1)", 2006, I can embed content so that it's a felt experience that is about the imagery and the form. I'm interested in connecting scattered or distributed objects or light like in the MATRIX work, as opposed to fully wall-mounted works, but have them connected to the wall in some way.

Rail: You've said in the past that you were inspired by Alan Rath's work when you were beginning to make art. You had been experimenting with film and video before that and had made a film about your brother's death, right?

Campbell: Yes. The video art that I was familiar with was referential to broadcast T.V. and this was not of interest to me. Rath stripped the idea of T.V. from video by getting rid of the container of the Cathode ray tube. His work is not at all about T.V.; it's more sculptural and electronic—that's what I liked about it.

Rail: I read something you said that rang true to me, because I have had experience with public art as a curator. You said that you don't consider public art to be art, but rather design, designing an experience, because of all the restrictions and issues you have to deal with in a public situation that you don't when you are in the studio.

Campbell: Yes, that's how I feel, but for me it's a good balance between what I call at times self-indulgent studio work and sellout public work. I prefer to do about 80 percent studio art and 20 percent public art.

Rail: To keep you in the world?

Campbell: Exactly. There's almost a formula for public art—it deals with the space, the history of the place, the local community.

Rail: Tell me about this piece, which, like “Home Movies,” consists of vertical wires holding LEDs faced to the wall.

Campbell: It's called “Taxi Ride to Sarah's Studio,” and it's an image of a trip across the Brooklyn Bridge. I changed the distance between the LEDs across the work—they are placed at a distance of two feet from one another on the far right and 2 inches from one another on the far left, so that the resolution is higher on the left and lower on the right. It's about peripheral vision. As they move from left to right, the figures fade into blurriness.

Rail: And about where you are in relation to it. Like a pointillist painting, you need to be at a certain distance to grasp the image.

Campbell: Even though it's a lot about technology, it's a felt experience as opposed to “Exploded View.”

Rail: Let's go back to the beginning. You were a student of engineering at MIT. What got you into art?

Campbell: Although I was always interested in filmmaking, I never thought I would be an artist. Making films and videos was a way of balancing my nerdy persona. MIT breeds neuroses because students are so focused on one side of their brain. I needed a balance.

Rail: Did you study with any artists other than the documentary filmmaker Richard Leacock?

Campbell: Yes, and I took a class with Otto Piene at the Center for Advanced Visual Studies at MIT. It was another world to me; I didn't understand it.

Rail: I remember the first piece I saw of yours where you saw your image on a monitor go up in flames.

Campbell: That was “Hallucination” (1998-90), basically the first piece I ever did.

Rail: Were you aware of Peter Campus's “Three Transitions,” 1973?

Campbell: I was. Campus, Bill Viola, and Gary Hill were the three artists who stuck with me from my class on video art.

Rail: Campus came out of filmmaking, too.

Campbell: He was at the Center for Advanced Visual Studies at MIT for a few months when I was there, although I didn't know him. I especially liked “Dor” from 1975, which resonates with some of

Nauman's work. There's a video camera pointed at a small hallway and a video projection right next to you, but by the time you see the image, your image is gone.

Rail: I also see relationships with some of Dan Graham's work.

Campbell: I had never heard of Graham when I made my digital watch pieces; I probably wouldn't have if I had known.

Rail: Another early work of yours, "Shadow (for Heisenberg)," (1993-1994), seems to mark a transition.

Campbell: It was the transition point from interactive work or what I sometimes call dancing in front of the camera—doing something interactive so you get what you want—and flipping that. I began by being fascinated with interactivity and then doubting it.

Rail: In Shadow (for Heisenberg) a small statue of a Buddha is in a glass box. As you approach it, the box fogs up so that you cannot see the Buddha, only its shadow. It's such a perfect metaphor for seeking to see, to understand, but the closer you get, the less you see.

Campbell: Yes, a metaphor for desire.

Rail: You used the Buddha statue in other work

Campbell: Yes, in a light box photograph "Dynamism of an Observer in the Weeds"

Rail: One of your Illuminated Averages pieces.

Campbell: This was the last one—done around 2002.

Rail: What caused the image to be blurry?

Campbell: I pointed the camera hand-held at the object for an hour and a half. The blur comes from the movement of my hand.

Rail: In some of your recent works, like "Market Street Pause," you combine motion and non-motion.

Campbell: When the motion stops, you can't read the image. Because of the low resolution, it's the movement that makes it readable. This doesn't happen with video. In a video, if you freeze the frame, the image is clear. Most of the photographs I tried to take of my first piece, "Running, Falling" (2000), didn't read, but "Exploded View" is the first piece I have made where you simply cannot photograph it.

Rail: Where did you find these tiny lights?

Campbell: We made them in my studio. They are little LEDs with shades on them that diffuse in a wonderful way.

Rail: You have other works in which a still photograph is combined with motion.

Campbell: There are those where the photograph is a backdrop, like “Library,” (2004). With these new works, I looked at what time period I would need to expose for people to disappear. Each step a person takes lasts about a half of a second. So with these images the exposure time was related to the movement. That’s why you see one leg on each figure--because a half-foot step is the length of the exposure.

Rail: What is the name of this series?

Campbell: “Fundamental Interval.” The one we have been discussing is “Fundamental Interval: Commuters.” The same principle applies with the ocean piece “Fundamental Interval: Waves.” I exposed the photograph for the length of time between the waves – about ten seconds. This other wave piece, Mori Point, is a three-minute exposure, and the waves go away completely, more like earlier works like “Library.” “Fundamental Interval: Waves” is more sublime to me. Your mind goes back and forth between static and movement—it can’t tell what to focus on; that’s what is successful about it.

Rail: In one of your new pieces, “Grand Central Station” (2009), the surface is carved, like a bas-relief.

Campbell: Yes, it’s a collaboration with Sarah Bostwick, an artist in Brooklyn who casts plaster. We couldn’t use plaster because it’s not transparent, but we wanted the effect. This is paint sprayed onto cast resin. It’s lit from the front along with the light from behind—the LEDs—that’s what brings out the relief. It’s reflective and transmissive light in equal amounts.

Rail: It looks like video is projected onto it.

Campbell: One could do that. I think it would look different. But that’s interesting. It’s a question I ask myself, “Can I do this with video or some other way?” If so, I should. It’s a way of matching the medium to the concept.

Rail: Some of your general overriding themes are time and memory.

Campbell: In earlier work, I was more interested in psychological time and somehow that shifted. I try to make art that can’t be imaged, like “Exploded View (Birds).”

Rail: The first time you angled the diffusion screen was in Church on 5th Avenue, 2001. The farther away the screen is the more diffuse the image. Richard Shiff in your catalog [Jim Campbell: Material Light] noted that in early photography, the calotype, which tended to be somewhat blurry, was

preferred to sharper daguerreotype because it was more evocative.

Campbell: For me it's by observation. I live with a small, low resolution work in my house, eight to 10 years old, a five minute LED loop, and I am still not sick of it. You would get tired of a five minute video fairly soon (like after a day). Something about never quite getting it keeps you engaged. You interpret details of things differently from the way you interpret movement or color. It's like analyzing a text. If there are no details, you don't have to think about it.

Rail: Memory is very imprecise.

Campbell: Yes it is, and I think imprecise images call upon imprecise memories to interpret them. They necessitate more imagination.

Note: All cited works are from 2010 unless otherwise noted. In addition to his fall 2010 installation in Madison Square Park, the artist's work will also be featured Jim Campbell: In the Repose of Memory in a dual exhibition at the Eleanor D. Wilson Museum at Hollins University and Roanoke College Galleries from September 16 – December 4, 2010. More information can be found at www.hollins.edu/museum/