

JIM CAMPBELL



“Engineering is about solving problems, and art is about creating them.”

—Jim Campbell¹

mimesis

Two night-lights glow and dim. Red LEDs (light-emitting diodes) flicker on and off, illuminating a figure running, falling, then getting up and running and falling, again and again. Phantom, ghost-like figures and birds momentarily coalesce before dissipating in front of a building, and fluttering shapes suddenly become the recognizable form of a bird in a cage. These and other transient, elusive, yet compelling electronic mnemonics by the San Francisco-based artist Jim Campbell defy easy categorization.²

An artist who “employs technology in the service of profound humanism,”³ Campbell’s custom electronics (“custom” as in he makes

the chips and writes the algorithms) are a neutral ground where two types of signal processing converge—the technological and the human—with neither privileged over the other. Combined, their resonance comes from the artist’s creation of a strangely empathetic space where we add our own meaning and personal history. As the LED panels and mixed-media works run through their programmed loops, they become a meme, transmitting ideas about both culture and the process, power and, indeed, frailty of human and digital memory.

Campbell’s chosen medium of consumer-grade electrical components, low-resolution LED panels, and black box computing seem like familiar objects and concepts in our digitally evolving era even though we may not understand exactly how they work. Through his selective use of low-fidelity technology, Campbell posits a subtle contrast between the LEDs highly pixelated digitized output—as in the ubiquitous electronic banner panel or the work of artist Jenny Holzer—and the analog or continuous world of image, text, numbers, and sound. Essentially he explores the question of how to take something that is essentially a “slave” with predictable outcomes—the computer—and create ambiguity. Powered up, these *Memory Works* and *Ambiguous Icons* unfold over time with a uniquely humane ebb and flow.

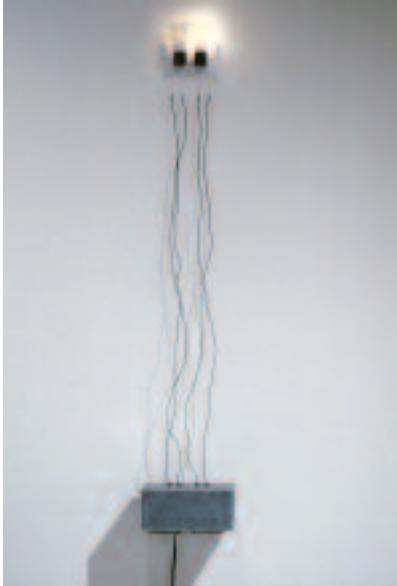
So how exactly does one use electronics to evoke the passage of time and the physicality of memory? The act of opening an album of family photographs can be so powerful that you almost smell what was happening at the moment pictured. On the other hand, looking at someone else’s photo album can quickly become an exercise in patience. Campbell’s art, for the most part, plies the threshold, or liminal space, where visual perception begins; but his métier is the opposite of focusing harder in order to “know.” Instead, he positions his conceptual and technological lenses to provide just enough information so that the gesture, body language, peripheral view, or oblique hint of a shape initiates, but does not complete the intuitive mental circuit.



Church on 5th Avenue, 2001
custom electronics, 768 LEDs,
treated Plexiglas
22 x 29 x 6 1/2 inches
Courtesy of the artist, San Francisco and
Hosfelt Gallery, San Francisco and New York
Made with financial assistance from
The Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art,
Science and Technology

Cover: **Library**, 2003 (detail)
custom electronics, 768 LEDs, photogravure,
treated Plexiglas
24 x 30 x 3 inches
Published by Graphicstudio, Tampa
Courtesy of the artist, San Francisco, and
Hosfelt Gallery, San Francisco and New York

Nightlights,
1994–95/98
custom
electronics,
light bulbs
72 x 15 x 5 inches
Courtesy of
the artist,
San Francisco,
and Hosfelt Gallery,
San Francisco
and New York



In an earlier work that is not in the exhibition, *Untitled (for Heisenberg)*, 1994–95, a video of two lovers projected on the floor become enlarged and indecipherable as the viewer approaches the projection. Campbell based this piece and subsequent work on physicist Werner Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, which postulates that the act of measuring a physical property of an object has an effect on that property. In other words, the harder we try to know, see, or pin down meaning and gain comfort through certitude, the further we get from the attainment of that desire.

Nightlights, 1994–95/1998,—one of the artist's *Memory Works*—is based on two synchronized re-presentations derived from Alfred Hitchcock's 1960 film *Psycho*.⁴ In this piece consisting of a metal box attached by wires to two nightlights on the wall above, two types of signal transmission are essentialized and synchronized as the nightlight on the left dims and glows in response to the movie's sound levels, while the nightlight on the right responds to the brightness of the same film's flickering images. Domestic and ubiquitous, nightlights signal both terror and comfort. Here Campbell's mimesis brings to mind a child sitting in front of a TV with a pillow in front of his/her face listening to a scary movie and watching the skittering light of the TV tube playing across the walls; riveted by the fascination of being terrified, yet knowing that in the middle of the night the beacon of the nightlight will keep scary thoughts

at bay. In his *Memory Works*, Campbell transforms such compellingly personal experiences using oblique visual impressions instead of a specific narrative.

Church on Fifth Avenue, 2001, features seemingly generic video footage that was recorded in midtown Manhattan a few days after 9/11. The artist placed an angled sheet of diffusing Plexiglas in front of the red LED panel; and as the images of pedestrians and cars move across the panel, they go from a "quantized" digital representation on the left to an analog, or seemingly more real version on the right, with the diffusing Plexiglas filling in the mid-tones of the pixelating LEDs.⁵ In the video there is a moment where a car and a figure pass each other going in opposite directions, each moving from one world of representation to the other while simultaneously shedding or gaining visual information as they pass each other. Each becomes both more and less real as they move behind the clarifying and obfuscating Plexiglas—the only difference being the distance of the Plexiglas from the LEDs. Similarly, *Ambiguous Icon #5 (running, falling)*, 2000, eschews a specific narrative, yet has tragic overtones as the figure tries, Sisyphus-like, to get up and run, again and again.

The tenuous nature of the storage and transference of knowledge is the subject of *Library*, 2003 (detail on cover), which features a high-resolution photogravure of the New York Public Library printed on rice paper and placed in a Plexiglas frame suspended in front of an LED panel. The library, an iconic repository of the history of the analog world, is superimposed against a 25-minute video chip loop of low-resolution figures and birds that appear and then fade away. In *Library*, Campbell posits a cautionary tale about revisionist tendencies as well as the potential for information loss through an over-reliance on evolving technology. For him, the alteration and reinterpretation of history and meaning over time, or what is lost in translation, mirrors the unknowable loss of information

through digitization where the quantizing effect sometimes has the unintended result of inadvertently changing the meaning of an image.

Finally, in *Hong Kong Bird Market*, 2005, the artist explores ideas about both the process as well as the responsibilities of acquiring knowledge. In this piece another low-resolution image flickers behind a sheet of rice paper. At first, the image of a bird in a cage is not obvious; however, once seen, the trapped bird cannot be unseen. Wired to seek out patterns and assign recognizable forms to shapes, the human brain has an innate predisposition toward pattern recognition, the first step in the acquisition of visually oriented knowledge. Since a state of pre-knowledge can never be reattained once the image or word is recognized, what then is our responsibility once we “know”? If you can’t unlearn an image or information, what then do you do with the constant data stream of breaking news?

While knowable and real in the most personal of ways, time and memory are intangible subjects

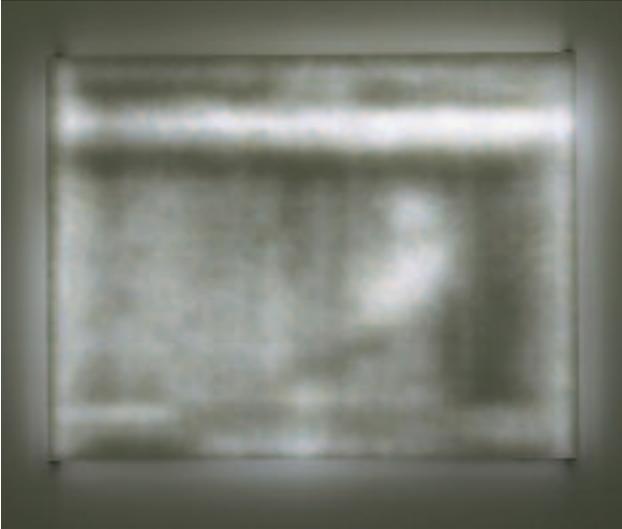
as the passage of one creates and becomes the impossible measure of the other—the harder we try to remember details, the less precise and more iconic memory becomes. As the artist has said, “my work . . . is about our (or my) psychological relationship to time and loss (or perhaps even our mortality) through memory.”⁶

In Jim Campbell’s art, nightlights, myth, film, commerce, libraries, and the bird in the cage (or is it the canary in the mineshaft?) have been transformed through technological means from common, generic cultural symbols into gentle, pulsing reminders of our own responsibility to experience and remember.

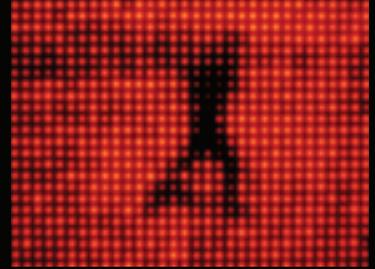
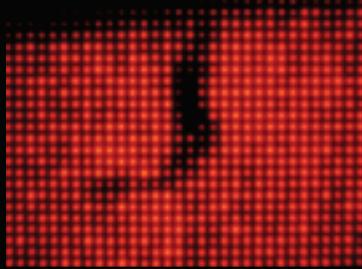
Kitty McManus Zurko
Director/Curator
The College of Wooster
Art Museum

Notes

1. Heather Sealy Lineberry, *Jim Campbell: Transforming Time, Electronic Works 1990–1999* (Tempe, Arizona: Tempe State University Art Museum, 1999), 64.
2. Jim Campbell attended the Massachusetts Institute of Technology where he earned degrees in electrical engineering and mathematics, and subsequently spent three years repairing TVs. The artist has said that the latter was a useful hands-on experience, as he is also a hardware engineer who holds numerous patents in image processing. Campbell began his art career in film and turned to installation and interactive video art in the mid-1980s. Richard Whittaker, “Interview with Jim Campbell,” *works + conversations*, Issue #2, Berkeley, California, http://www.conversations.org/jim_campbell.htm.
3. Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson, *Jim Campbell: Memory Array/MATRIX 208*, Berkeley Art Museum, University of California Berkeley, September 12–November 16, 2003, (exhibition brochure).
4. Campbell’s *Memory Works*, 1994–1998, are digital representations of personal events.
5. In digital processing, quantization is the process of approximating a continuous range of values through a discrete set of values. Converting an analog image or data set into a digital signal is called quantizing, and usually results in some loss of the source material.
6. *Quantizing Effects: The Liminal Art of Jim Campbell*, eds. Sarah S. King and Joseph Guglietti (Santa Fe, New Mexico: SITE Santa Fe, 2005), 45.



Hong Kong Bird Market, 2005
custom electronics, 768 LEDs,
rice paper, treated Plexiglas
21 1/2 x 29 x 3 inches
Courtesy of the artist, San Francisco and
Hosfelt Gallery, San Francisco and New York



Ambiguous Icon #5 (running, falling),
2000 (three views)
custom electronics, 768 LEDs
22 x 29 x 3 inches
Courtesy of the artist, San Francisco and
Hosfelt Gallery, San Francisco
and New York
Made with financial assistance from
The Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art,
Science and Technology

Checklist

- 1. Nightlights, 1994–95/98**
custom electronics, light bulbs
72 x 15 x 5 inches
Courtesy of the artist, San Francisco,
and Hosfelt Gallery,
San Francisco and New York
- 2. A Fire a Freeway and a Walk, 1999–2000**
custom electronics, 52 LEDs,
aluminum, velvet
11 x 15 x 1 1/2 inches
Courtesy of Brigitte Sandquist and
Phil Black, San Francisco
Made with financial assistance from
The Daniel Langlois Foundation for
Art, Science and Technology
- 3. Ambiguous Icon #5 (running, falling), 2000**
custom electronics, 768 LEDs
22 x 29 x 3 inches
Courtesy of the artist, San Francisco,
and Hosfelt Gallery, San Francisco
and New York
Made with financial assistance from
The Daniel Langlois Foundation for
Art, Science and Technology
- 4. Church on 5th Avenue, 2001**
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22 x 29 x 6 1/2 inches
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and Hosfelt Gallery, San Francisco
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- 5. Library, 2003**
custom electronics, 768 LEDs,
photogravure, treated Plexiglas
24 x 30 x 3 inches
Published by Graphicstudio, Tampa
Courtesy of the artist, San Francisco,
and Hosfelt Gallery, San Francisco
and New York
- 6. Hong Kong Bird Market, 2005**
custom electronics, 768 LEDs,
rice paper, treated Plexiglas
21 1/2 x 29 x 3 inches
Courtesy of the artist, San Francisco,
and Hosfelt Gallery, San Francisco
and New York

Dimensions h x w x d

About the Artist

Jim Campbell was born in Chicago and lives and works in San Francisco. He received a B.S. in both Mathematics and Engineering from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (M.I.T.) in 1978. His work was the subject of a one-person traveling exhibition organized in 2005 by SITE Santa Fe in collaboration with the MATRIX Program of the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum, and the Pacific Film Archive.

Other selected one-person exhibitions include those at the Hosfelt Gallery, San Francisco, CA, 2000, 2002, 2005, and Hosfelt Gallery, New York, NY, 2006; Bryce Wolkowitz Gallery, New York, NY, 2005; Palo Alto Art Center, Palo Alto, CA, 2004; American Museum of the Moving Image, New York, NY, 2004; Berkeley Art Museum/Pacific Film Archive, University of California Berkeley, Berkeley, CA, 2003; Exploratorium, San Francisco, CA, 2003; Nagoya City Art Museum, Japan, 2002; Battery Park, New York, NY, 2002; Wood Street Galleries, Pittsburgh, PA, 2001; Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, CA, 2000; San Jose Museum of Art, San Jose, CA, 1998; and the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City, MO, 1997.

Selected group exhibitions include those at the CU Art Museum, University of Colorado, Boulder, CO, 2005; Eyebeam, Center for Art and Technology, New York, NY, 2005; Skirball Cultural Center, Los Angeles, CA, 2004; Chelsea Museum, New York, 2004; Salina Art Center, Salina, KS, 2004; Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, ME, 2003; The Fabric Museum, Philadelphia, PA, 2003; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY, 2002; Ackland Art Museum, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC, 2000; and the Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio State University, Columbus, OH, 1998.

Jim Campbell received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2003; Langlois Foundation Grants in 2000 and 2002/2003; a Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship Award in 1999; and a SECA Award in 1996 from the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

His work is represented in the following selected public collections: Berkeley Art Museum, University of California at Berkeley, CA; Cincinnati Art Museum, Cincinnati, OH; The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, CA; Knoxville Museum of Art, Knoxville, TN; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY; Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA; San Jose Museum of Art, San Jose, CA; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY.

The artist is represented by Hosfelt Gallery, San Francisco and New York.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I thank the artist for sharing his unique vision about the intersection of life, art, and technology. I first saw Jim Campbell's work at the 2002 Whitney Biennial and find it no less compelling today. I also thank Todd Hosfelt, Hosfelt Gallery, for making this exhibition possible at The College of Wooster Art Museum. To Jim Campbell's administrative assistant, Karen Gallagher, a warm thank you for her gentle guidance throughout this project.

At Wooster, the museum staff, Joyce Fuell, Museum Administrative Coordinator, and Doug McClumphy, Museum Preparator, once again handled the many details of the concurrent *Jim Campbell* and *Hiraki Sawa* exhibitions with their usual skill and aplomb.

Kitty McManus Zurko
Director/Curator
The College of Wooster
Art Museum

JIM CAMPBELL

August 29–October 22, 2006

Burton D. Morgan Gallery

The College of Wooster Art Museum

Ebert Art Center

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