

Stills

Aileen Campbell



## Listening is Looking: Singing is Making

"there's the pole of the one who makes the work, and the pole of the one who looks at it. I give the latter as much importance as the one who makes it."

Marcel Duchamp'

Pushing back against the successes of Impressionist painting, Duchamp was never one to appreciate the pleasures of simply looking; for him that led only to the narrow rewards of what he called 'retinal' art. Instead he sought a more active engagement from his viewers, he wanted them to think, react, and, in doing so complete the work by completing the transaction put in motion by the artist. In articulating this dynamic he put in motion a century's worth of investigations into the limits of art, and of the precise nature of the relationship between artist and public. In her explorations of voice as material, and her scrutiny of the relationship between performer, performance, and spectator Aileen Campbell pursues this line of inquiry with a thorough, but humorous insistence, that, in her most recent works, provides an emotional payoff of a rich humanity foreign to the old French trickster.

As her 2005 video, *The Rabble Voice*, opens we see a group of about sixty people sitting in a small auditorium, a somewhat worn room with a steep pitch and a projection booth in back. The group is mostly young, and surprisingly homogenous; in fact, with the exception of one woman wearing a headscarf this is a very Northern European looking crew, all casually dressed in ways that suggest the weather outside



As Jane Edwards & Geoffrey Rush, Video (2005)

is something to consider. There are a handful of older people scattered throughout, teachers perhaps. It is easy to imagine that we are looking at a college audience, waiting to hear a lecture. As the tape begins there is nervous laughter and quite a bit of that self-conscious re-settlement that happens as students acknowledge each other's presence and attempt to make themselves comfortable for whatever lies ahead. Time passes, and a certain discomfort reigns, as everyone in the room attempts to ignore the knowledge that they are subject to the scrutiny of a video camera.

There is, in this turning of a captive audience into the subject of a filmwork to be watched by another audience, elsewhere, an echo of Sharon Lockhart's *Teatro Amazonas* of 1999. Lockhart's film works on the scale of theatrical presentation; it is full length, shot in 35 mm., and shows several hundred people in an ornate colonial theatre deep in the Amazonian jungle. The people are local, it is their theatre, but they too are uncomfortable under the uninflected gaze of the camera. However as the film rolls they are offered at least some comfort as choral music swells, and then fades. Lockhart offers a spectacle of looking and being looked at.

*The Rabble Voice* is much smaller, more local. It is video, not film, shot with friends and acquaintances in a well-known room. Most of all, the spectators are participants, and quickly become actors. As the unease settles into discomfort, they begin to sing as a raggedy choir. Not words, but single notes, clearly following instructions from the stage. Single notes, rising notes, difficult notes. Warm-up for choral practice, but this is obviously not a choir, and it is clear that many are not musicians at all. The singing continues, as does the embarrassment, but slowly a sense of participatory fun takes root, bodies relax, smiles spread. By the end of the video we have witnessed the pleasure to be found in making. A pleasure in making art, as distinct from, and harder to achieve than, the pleasure of consuming it.

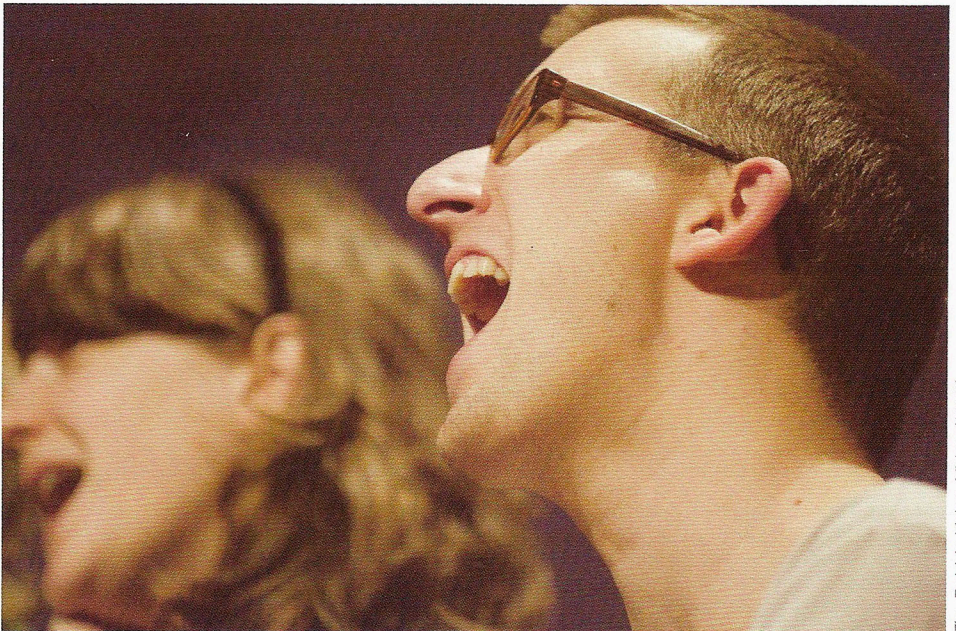
Watching this tape alerts us to the social dynamics of looking, and in doing so heightens our awareness of listening. We watch for clues about the who, and the where; eavesdrop for hints on why and how. Out of the embarrassed chaos of many anxious eyes looking for understanding, it is the collective voice, directed but somewhat directionless, that asserts its presence, gives body to the moment and to the piece. This voice is the product of the collective, but assails us as a singularity, as something with its own character and being. When an individual in the front row speaks at the end, that voice, an individual voice, seems somehow unreal, an intruder in the imaginary space created. The question, is it over, brings us back to the anxiety of the beginning, the coherence of voice is lost as the uncertainty of vision returns.

*The Rabble Voice* is an early work, but it lays out the themes and characteristics of Campbell's work. There is the primary focus on voice, using it as a material to be shaped, prodded, analysed. There is the question of performance, the relationship between artist and audience, the question of limits, of training and skill. Beyond that there is an insistence on the everyday, the familiar, and with that, a sensitivity to issues of age, gender, class.

In the following years Campbell seems to have embarked on a series of tests, pushing the limits of methods and materials. As *Jane Edwards and Geoffrey Rush* (2005), highlights the perception of an estrangement between voice and body, using distortions of the conventions of musical performance and cinema to create a

disruption in the viewer's line of sight. This work features musicians playing in accompaniment to a figure bouncing on a trampoline. Camera work and sound synchronization combine to support an illusion that the athlete is singing the Vivaldi aria we hear, the 'true' accompaniment to the music. The voice is female, it is no illusion, she is no athlete, and she is singing this Vivaldi aria. We face a set of irreconcilable visions revolving around performance possibilities, the realities of breath, plausible bodies.

*What if I Do It Like This?* 2007 is a sequence of four black and white videos separated by title cards that each propose further questions about method, origin, or intent. In the first segment we see the torso of a young woman in a summer dress, head stuck inside the ceiling vent of a heating system. There is sound, a continuous droning or wailing with eerie reverberations; a human voice, but the visual clue – a headless body – leaves us uncertain. The next section shows us a close up of the missing head, or at least a mouth, crammed full of what appears to be a small speaker, facing inward. We hear a similarly haunting sound, but are again unsure of its origin as human and mechanical confront one another. The following part – the title card reads 'heartfelt song' – we now see the woman in the polka dot dress, and hear her singing extended phrases that, while wordless, seem packed with emotion. But the seriousness of this performance is put into question by the strange, stuffed-glove hands gesturing in front of the singer, puppet-like harbingers of the absurd whose presence seems to contradict the authenticity of the keening music. Having been asked where the sound comes from, we are now asked to consider its meaning. The final segment returns to the physical as we watch the singer attempt to complete a vocal warm up while doing push-ups, her increasingly strenuous breathing at odds with the longer, slower breaths required by the music.



The Rabble Voice, Video (2005)

If in these and similar works Campbell investigates and articulates the parameters of her practice, more recent projects build on their discoveries. The video, *Starform (Alex)* 2007, shot in high definition, begins with a close up of an older man sitting in a dark room. We hear the airless tonalities of daytime television, and realize he is sitting at home, switching channels, killing time. He soon settles on the racing, and checks form in the paper. We notice he is unshaved, we suspect he is not in good health. Almost imperceptibly the TV sound fades, replaced by the soft playing of a piano. We glimpse a young woman playing a cello, but do not hear her. Back on television, the image of a solitary horse, a whispered reference to hospital between two actors in a soap opera, and the claustrophobia we have been experiencing turns to melancholy. The music rises, and the man seems more frail; are his eyes tearing, or is he simply listening? We see details of the musicians' tools, a music stand, the foot of the cello, the cracked patina of a viola. These are young professionals, and we are left to wonder if they are rehearsing in the man's home; perhaps a family ritual, or a charity visit. A cut, and he is standing in front of a window, framed by flimsy curtains. The filtered light lends a worn aura that matches his worn face. He begins to sing the Christmas carol, O Holy Night. He has a nice voice, a church voice, untrained but confident. The rest of the music swells with strings and oboe, we see hands and bows. Song and video end together.

Here Campbell raises her usual questions about the nature of her practice, but frames them in a narrative structure that allows for a greater emotional resonance. The ambient sound of our everyday, the mechanically recorded drone of commerce, plays against the specific sounds of professional classical music. The remembered excitement of the races animates a dull morning. The solace of culture tangles with that of religion, the church being a more likely place for the working class to hear music than the concert hall. All these public realms colliding in the recesses of the private home produce a complex response in which we rejoice in the temporary victory over loneliness as the solitary voice picks up and shouts out to its neighbours. A heartfelt voice, existentially true.

### Thomas Lawson (2008)

<sup>1</sup> (Pierre Cabanne: Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp. The Documents of Twentieth Century Art, Viking Press, New York. 1971. P70.)

Front cover: *Starform (Alex)*, Photograph (2007)

Aileen Campbell participated in Stills' Residency Programme in 2007.

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What if I do it Like This?, Production Still (2007)



What if I do it Like This? Heartfelt Song, Production Still (2007)