

The Gossip and Ghosts of Colin Campbell

Jon Davies



Colin Campbell (*clockwise from top left*), *Culver City Limits*, 1977, still from a 9-minute black-and-white video; *Déjà vu*, 1999, still from an 18-minute colour video; *Conundrum Clinique*, 1981, still from a 14-minute colour video; *Bad Girls*, 1980, still from a 65-minute black-and-white video

“Viewing gossip...as a form of fabulation allows us to recognize it as a performative mode of oral discourse that produces highly resonant characters, mythic types, or legendary figures whose embodied particularities are the stuff out of which others nourish their hopes and desires for ever more and varied ways of being in the world.”

—Marc Siegel, “Vaginal Davis’s Gospel Truths.”¹

Pioneering Canadian artist Colin Campbell (b. 1942 Reston, Manitoba; d. 2001 Toronto, Ontario) used video as a flexible and accessible medium for storytelling; his oeuvre is about characters and their words. Campbell’s homespun tapes are a perverse collage of tall tales, rumours, conversations and daydreams gleaned from his everyday life. Ever the great collector, Campbell would borrow a bon mot here, a dirty joke there, a dash of tabloid eccentricity and voilà: an unforgettable story, an unforgettable character. Making art was no sublime act of creation but merely what friends and lovers did together in the incestuous young art community developing in Toronto in the seventies and eighties. Ironic, irreverent and ambiguous, always attuned to the playful shifting of genders and desires, Campbell’s tapes chart how identity is performed and circulated in the social world. Boundaries of truth and falsity concerned him even less than conventional ideas of screen acting and narrative closure did; for the most vibrant personas—those we remember and celebrate like his Art Star, the Woman from Malibu and Robin—are those that liberally supplement the banal details of lived experience with the excesses of myth and fantasy.

Art historian Gavin Butt has suggested, “gossiping is a form of social activity which produces and maintains the filiations of artistic community.”² Campbell’s life and art practice derived both inspiration and form through gossip. The characters he created and inhabited—and those he coaxed out of his collaborators—confide secrets and stories to us, crafting elaborate and compelling mythologies around themselves. As Campbell absorbed all manner of talk from his acquaintances, friends and lovers, he and his ragtag troupe of performer-pals processed these day-to-day experiences through video and spat them back out again. This feedback loop opened up his art practice to those of his closest kin as well as to his many students and protégés, resulting in the engaged conversation between artists and artworks that goes into cohering and procreating an art scene.

Gossip is the traffic in unofficial information, a form of makeshift knowledge about people in one’s social world and what they get up to. It is not ultimately about whether something is actually true, based as it is on the whims of its participants rather than hard evidence. Campbell’s tapes demonstrate how reality can be manipulated and made up to reflect one’s desires. Through videotape, he gossiped with and about his real social circle and created a new one, a group of fictional personas who became tangibly real once their tapes were watched, loved (or hated) and talked about. By the time Campbell passed away, his personas were left bereft of a body, but they continue to float freely in our collective consciousness to this day.

So reads my introduction to the exhibition “People Like Us: The Gossip of Colin Campbell,” a retrospective of the artist’s illustrious video career—the first since his death in 2001—that I curated for Oakville Galleries in Oakville, Ontario, in late 2008. Campbell was an iconic figure in the Toronto art world who was instrumental in establishing the highly visible and vibrant local queer art and media art scenes we have today. The title of my catalogue essay for the exhibition was stolen from his videotape *Culver City Limits* (1977),

specifically Campbell's character The Woman from Malibu's haunting comment about the man who shot her dead on the highway: "I Did Not Know Him." In my hand, it became a confession: I did not know him, Colin Campbell. But despite this, I was able to get to somehow "know" him—intimately—through his work and through a community that continues to surround Campbell. This collective mantles factual and fictive, living and dead: a chosen family bound together by and invested in the practice of gossip, with its heady potential for fabulation and self-fashioning. Gossip, in this sense, creates community.

What Colin Campbell represented was a kind of permission to self-mythologize. Luis Jacob, both in this volume and elsewhere, has argued that in Toronto in the seventies and eighties an exciting and glamorous art scene had to be invented out of thin air by Canadian artists—isolated and peripheral to the US—performing what they imagined artists to be, and then seeking out peers, creating or colonizing spaces, and representing themselves in the media. As Jacob puts it, artists had to "perform a scene, perform an audience, in order to summon what does not exist."³ While Jacob identifies legendary Toronto artist collective General Idea's multifaceted art practice as epitomizing a highly self-conscious performance of "the artist," Campbell, all alone in the even more remote cultural backwater of Sackville, New Brunswick, appropriately enough transformed himself into the imagined persona of an artist, Art Star, in his *Sackville, I'm Yours* (1972).

In General Idea's 1987 text "Towards a World Class Audience," they appraise how the "fictional art scene" they invented through their activities became real as artists flocked to Toronto and organized themselves.⁴ They did this through founding artist-run centres (ARCs), our socialized meta-structure for artistic creation and exhibition in Canada that is non-commercial, community-based and artist-led, unlike both the for-profit gallery system and public institutions such as museums. In a text entitled "Art Speaks in the 80s," Campbell lauded progressive and provocative ARCs for encouraging experimentation—including both time-based work, and, I would add, queer representation—and for being dynamic, catholic and politically engaged.⁵ As he maintained, they were his home, where the action was:

Public and commercial galleries have notoriously bad reputations as sources of gossip and scandal. In other words, they generate practically none. Almost totally worthless! ARCs, on the other hand, are hotbeds of speculative social philandering ... Tongues wag. Fingers wag. Camps are demarcated. Burn out, melt down, flared tempers, dampened spirits... these are the active ingredients of artist-run society. No one's reputation can ever be ruined ... we all think we know each other too well. There are no fortunes to be lost, no patrons to shock or offend.⁶

Campbell's practice was predicated on involvement at all levels of a number of friends, acquaintances and rivals, who both appeared in the work and acted as its audience. As Bruce Ferguson comments in his text "Notes on a Local History," Toronto video artists at the time fulfilled a huge variety of different roles in the scene, and he suggests that, "This might return video to its initial, ongoing, historical conception as a tool of community interaction."⁷

Campbell's videos are documents of how his performers chose to perform for the camera in his fictions, while also charting the affiliations and conflicts of his social world. For example, his beloved persona of Robin in his bare-bones diptych *Modern Love* (1978) and

Bad Girls (1980) left an indelible impression on the Toronto art world psyche by crystallizing all our secret fears about our own social status. Screened in regular installments at the Spadina Avenue musician and artist hangout, the Cabana Room, these videos were explicitly about the Cabana Room and its patrons, and they expertly capture how an art scene functions, its tensions and pretensions, its undeniable allure and the strict divide of insider and outsider. Winningly oblivious to her desperate lack of cool, Robin is the naïve girl caught up in a perplexing “modern” world overrun with poseurs and charlatans. Philip Monk, who has studied the self-fashioning and self-representation of Toronto’s art scene extensively, has singled out Robin’s tapes as a “critical moment in the self-recognition of an art community.”⁸ I expected that the opening of “People Like Us,” which featured *Bad Girls* prominently, would be a similar moment of Toronto art community self-recognition.

Indeed, at the opening, Campbell’s community was not only emotionally affected by seeing so many spectres of him in one space several years after his death, but also by the sight of themselves younger, not just from another time but seemingly from another place. The gallery’s layout produced uncanny juxtapositions of his and the other faces on his tapes with the faces of those present; sometimes the same person could be glanced both on tape from thirty years ago and live in the flesh as well.

Writing about photography, Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* finds each image an irreversible reminder that whatever was recorded by the camera no longer exists as it had at that instant. With film and video, the scene unfolds in time—rather than being stuck in a single instant as in photography—but that span of time is still forever gone. All indexical recordings serve to remind us of what has already been lost. Populating the exhibition we have Campbell’s ghost, as well as those of Tim Guest, David Buchan, Alex Wilson, Felix Partz, and others who performed in the videos. But separate from the real casualties of history, there are also the fictional ghosts that haunt Campbell’s work: several characters continuing to talk, to reveal secrets and to spin yarns for us from beyond the grave. They refuse to let go of their social bonds, as if their need for relationality is so potent that it cannot be stilled by death.

So we have Kerri Kwinter as Anouk, the middle-aged Belgian critic Anna’s lover who is dying of cancer in Campbell’s masterpiece *Dangling By Their Mouths* (1981). Anouk’s death is a devastating trauma that transforms Anna from a charismatic charmer—who beguiles two visiting Canadians, an actor and a performance artist—into a brooding, ominous spectre. While living, she recites a lengthy passage from the dead matriarch Addie Bundren’s famed monologue in William Faulkner’s novel *As I Lay Dying*. Kwinter, who chose the selection herself for the video, calls it “the part where [Faulkner] lets his dead woman speak.” Then, like Addie, Anouk speaks from the dead herself at the tape’s end to offer an unsettling conclusion to the drama.

Then we have Campbell as The Woman from Malibu in *Culver City Limits*, where she devastatingly recounts her own murder on the highway, and as John in *Conundrum Clinique* (1981). Here Campbell plays a vain, cosmetic-keen nuclear scientist whose testimony is juxtaposed with that of Nancy, his boss/lover at NASA, who killed him either accidentally or on purpose during a gay tryst, it’s left unclear.

Finally there’s Andrea in *Deadly Destiny*, Campbell’s second of two unpublished novels, written in 1998. Appropriately enough, she is a scholar of reincarnation narratives, who

disappears in Belgium before a conference and writes to her colleague and friend Mallory, the book's protagonist, to tell her how she had been kidnapped and murdered.

These voices from the dead, these ghosts, offer a moving foreshadowing of Campbell's power to stay with us long after his passing, thanks to the proliferation of his body and soul into so many personas and into his intensely loved accomplices over thirty years of work. The gossip of Colin Campbell—his characters and what they said, the real social world they were drawn from—continue to transform the lives of those who saw them. I would like to propose that Campbell's continued presence in Toronto, and specifically in our art scene and its generations of participants, is paradigmatic of a form of queer cultural transmission that transcends frail and fallible human bodies to pass on queer knowledge and feelings across time and space through cultural objects like videos.

The burgeoning field studying queer temporality has opened up the question of how we can imagine different forms of experiencing time, a time outside of the forward-moving rush of progress or the familiar life narrative of birth, childhood, adulthood, marriage, reproduction, and death. Queer theorist Elizabeth Freeman has commented on how queers are often constructed as without past or future: on the one hand, "no childhood, no origin or precedent in nature, no family traditions or legends, and, crucially, no history as a distinct people."⁹ On the other, "no children, no succeeding generations, no meaningful way to contribute to society, no hope, no plans, and nothing to offer most political tomorrows..."¹⁰ The result is that the past haunts many queer cultural producers like a spectre; history compels us. Carla Freccero speaks "of a desire issuing from another time and placing a demand on the present in the form of an ethical imperative."¹¹ In a roundtable on queer temporality in the queer studies journal *GLQ*, historian Carolyn Dinshaw discusses "the possibility of touching across time, collapsing time through affective contact between marginalized people now and then" and suggests "that with such queer historical touches we could form communities across time."¹² These communities that seemingly transcend time and space also include intensely loved cultural objects among their ranks, arguably elevating a work of art to the status of personhood. This is arguably because the closet has historically forced queer visibility away from the social surface to become sublimated into aesthetic expression, with its protective codings of metaphor, subtext and ornament.

In Campbell's two unpublished novels and his final tapes (which date from the mid- to late-nineties), he explicitly grappled with these ideas. In his late videos he returned to the personas he created in the seventies, whether through found footage or through performing them again, and invented new narratives for them. Most poignantly, in *Déjà vu* (1999) Campbell recycles key scenes from the Robin and Woman from Malibu tapes, and, through editing, re-imagines them as conversations that took place between these women and their new sister, performance artist "Colleena"—with all played by Campbell. The effect is quite powerful, especially as it transforms what had once been monologues directed at the audience into conversations among sisters, literalizing the relationality that is at the heart of Campbell's oeuvre. These personas all look and sound like Campbell, they share his genes, but in the end they are not him, only fragments of an ungraspable whole. In Campbell's first novel, *The Lizard's Bite* (1994), there is a character who is given eternal life after finding Caravaggio's diaries, and the painter continues to make mischief hundreds of years later

among a group of his fans. The second novel, *Deadly Destiny*, deals with reincarnation and the ripples in the present day caused by a queer Medieval poet and monk on the life of the scholar studying him. Appropriately enough, Freeman has theorized drag as a kind of reincarnation, a historical slippage: “we might think of it as a non-narrative history written with the body, in which the performer channels another body... making this body available to a context unforeseen in its bearer’s lived historical moment.”¹³

But beyond Campbell’s self-reflexive final works, I am more generally interested in his legacy as a way of “retracing” as video artist and academic Nguyen Tan Hoang puts it, “a young person’s secretive and circuitous routes to queer culture (through music, art, literature, popular culture) and revisiting the various scenes of queer pedagogy (not only in the classroom and library but also in the park, street, bar, basement, kitchen, chat room, bedroom).”¹⁴ In these scenes of initiation, queer and proto-queer children are transformed by cultural objects and figures from the past that seem to speak through time, and they go on to imitate them in their own lives/artistic practices. The ongoing relevance and circulation of Campbell’s identity and his work testifies to the flourishing of an alternative form of community, a queer aesthetic legacy that exceeds the heterosexual kinship/reproductive model. This touch across time and generations is arguably the life-blood of queer cultural production, particularly in the age of our normalization and supposed liberation.

This legacy manifests itself in many ways, from the continued circulation and canonization of Campbell’s work to his role as mentor to his videos’ openness as texts. Campbell’s work is also highly verbal, conversational and discursive, and this flow of talk continues after death because gossip is able to take on a life of its own once it has left a mouth and found an ear. Because they are so intimate and chatty, these tapes give you the sense that you are being let in on a secret and initiated into a glamorous club, a social scene that lives longer than individual members do—a community that exceeds time and space. Also, Campbell’s characters are mythic. They may originate in daily life but they are supplemented by fantasy to become something bigger: alter-egos that exceed Campbell’s authorship.

So Campbell haunts us in a number of ways—he is a ghost—but what is so affecting I think is that he is only one of many on the landscape. The ghost has become a privileged figure in queer culture since the dawn of the AIDS pandemic, and these ghosts of the past offer valuable lessons in queer kinship for today. In the queer community, AIDS has effectively eroded the boundaries between the living and the dead, demanding that we make room for ghosts—the ghosts of all those dead artists in particular—and so with AIDS the phenomenon of queer cultural transmission and of artistic legacies being passed on becomes even more a kind of haunting. And I would like to invoke AA Bronson here, who transformed his existence and his art practice after the deaths of his fellow General Idea members Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal.¹⁵ Bronson is now conducting queer séances with collaborator Peter Hobbs and many others that he calls Invocation of the Queer Spirits. Bronson states simply: “We each participate in a queer community of the living and the dead.”¹⁶ This queer community links past and present, what artist Emily Roysdon refers to as “a queer relationship to history in the movement between time and space.” Roysdon continues, “I know that even in my community now, we live in a mythical space... We have had the opportunity to cull our history and in that action we perform our future.”¹⁷

With the futurity of queer community in mind, I would like to return to one of Campbell's most important collaborative relationships, that with filmmaker and video artist John Greyson, whose work is populated by legions of ghosts of history's dead queers. To give just one example, his 1993 feature film *Zero Patience* follows Sir Richard Francis Burton, somehow alive and well and working in a Toronto natural history museum. He hopes to develop an exhibit around Patient Zero, the mythic promiscuous flight attendant who reputedly single-handedly introduced AIDS to North America. The ghost of Zero returns and Burton, perhaps because he should be dead himself, is the only one who can see him. Greyson's work is so steeped in camp and artifice that one could argue that his modus operandi is anachronism; he collides together seemingly conflicting historical figures, styles and forms in a single work. The figure of the ghost is a literal manifestation of the anachronism, for they are a person who refuses to dematerialize after their time is through. Neither quite dead nor fully alive, they evidence open wounds, unfinished business, moving freely between the past and the present, confronting us against our will. In Greyson's work, if a historical figure could shed light on a contemporary dilemma for the greater benefit of the queer community of the living and the dead¹⁸ then it is our collective responsibility to bring them back to life and squeeze some wit and wisdom from them. So I'd like to think that Campbell's ghost will continue to haunt us as long as we live in a time and place that desperately needs his wryly profound lessons in desire, in how to perform the self, and in how to glamorously navigate a hostile world.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Marc Siegel, "Vaginal Davis's Gospel Truths," *Camera Obscura* 23.1 (2008): 156.
- 2 Gavin Butt, *Between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World, 1948-1963* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 1.
- 3 Luis Jacob, "From Stream to Golden Stream," *SWITCH* 1.1 (2008): 32.
- 4 General Idea, "Towards a World Class Audience," *Toronto: A Play of History* (Toronto: The Power Plant, 1987), 38-9.
- 5 Colin Campbell, "Art Speaks in the 80s," *Parallelogramme* 14.1 (1988): 17.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Bruce Ferguson, "Notes on a Local History," *Toronto: A Play of History* (Toronto: The Power Plant, 1987), 56.
- 8 Sarah Milroy, "Colin Campbell: Passionate Pioneer of Video Art (Obituary)," *The Globe and Mail*, November 17, 2001, F9.
- 9 Elizabeth Freeman, introduction to Queer Temporalities, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13.2-3 (2007): 162.
- 10 Ibid., 165.
- 11 Carla Freccero et al., "Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13.2-3 (2007): 184.
- 12 Ibid., 178.
- 13 Elizabeth Freeman, introduction to Queer Temporalities, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13.2-3 (2007): 164.
- 14 Carla Freccero et al., "Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13.2-3 (2007): 183.
- 15 Nearly thirty years previously, Campbell was the subject of AA Bronson's meta-gossip piece "Truth & Beauty," *File 3* (1975): 44. Ostensibly about a screening of his work at A Space gallery, Bronson devotes most of his column inches to Peggy Gale's hairdo and reflections on the genius of Vidal Sassoon. Incidentally, when he passed away, Toronto's beloved art-cum-gossip rag *Lola* (1997-2003) smartly featured an imagined conversation between one "Bambi Acconci" and Campbell's personas.
- 16 "Interview with Anne Pasternak and AA Bronson," Creative Time, <http://www.creativetime.org/programs/archive/2008/invoation/interview.html>.
- 17 Jean Carlomusto, "Radiant Spaces," *Corpus* 4.1 (2006): 78. (Reprinted from *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 10.4 [2004]: 671-9.)
- 18 Here I'm invoking the motley crew of Frida Kahlo, Sergei Eisenstein, Dorian Gray, Langston Hughes, Yukio Mishima, Florence Wyle, and Frances Loring who were brought together to talk about washroom sex and its repression in his 1988 feature video *Urinal*.