



Jim Campbell's "168 Light Bulbs"

Mind Over Electronic Matter

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In the late 1970s, artist Jim Campbell earned degrees in mathematics and electrical engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and now uses his technical know-how to make art. He writes software, creates custom-made electronics and manipulates an array of devices (from clocks and cameras to programming languages and LED screens) to build user-friendly installations.

Technology is Campbell's palette. Yet unlike some of his equally computer-savvy contemporaries, Campbell rarely offers criticisms (to put his work in terms of black and white) of the information age. Rather, he uses the tools of the information age to address quite corporeal and emotional issues, in simple, lucid language.

Time + Data, a retrospect of his work from the past decade, took five years to finally make it to Pittsburgh. Above the entrance to the Wood Street Galleries, Downtown, Campbell has installed the aptly titled "168 Light Bulbs" — a somewhat festive-looking installation, but for the image of a man running alone on a beach that he's programmed into the lighting pattern.

One can take this to mean any number of things: that he's commenting on, for instance, the mechanized lives we lead,

struggle, human energy versus that of devices such as light bulbs. Perhaps he means to suggest *all* of these things. Judging from the pieces in the show, he's definitely interested in solitude.

Take for example, "Running Falling Cut." Here, the lower half of a body runs ahead of its top half. One might expect such an image to have a slapstick sensibility, but it actually doesn't; it's a somber and quiet image. Most of his work is — whether it's a clock's tick, leaves crunching under feet walking through a dry winter brush, or the sound of a man reading the Bible aloud, one letter at a time.

In the latter, "I Have Never Read The Bible," only a real trouper would be able to comprehend the passages of the Bible as read by the soft voice Campbell uses in the piece. Symbolically, the act of reading a sacred text letter by letter adds a certain physicality and humanity to a spiritual and theoretical concept. Historically, the act suggests issues of interpretation. (That itself is an interesting concept to consider these days).

But the universally human themes don't make Campbell's tools invisible — they are, of course, a defining element of his work. This is, after all, one of his major points. In "Untitled (for Heisenberg)" — another work that con-

siders perception — Campbell references the German physicist's uncertainty principle in a room-sized installation. Here he has projected onto a bed of salt an image of sexual intimacy between two figures. Through a network of motion sensors and a computer-controlled videodisc, the viewer's proximity to the image affects the size of the image. So as one approaches the bed of salt, the image is enlarged until the figures are unrecognizable. In this sense, Campbell's computerized works aren't merely controllable by the user — the user is equally controlled.

Perhaps then it's the two-way street of the information age that interests Campbell. In "Experiments in Touching Color", a touch-screen kiosk allows a visitor to manipulate what the screen displays and also the actions of the user. In "Digital Watch" viewers can see their live and digitally stored images projected in two locations on a single screen within the same plane, so that they've access to both what we call "real time" and time passed.

And this is what's truly engaging about Campbell's work: all the moments he creates in which viewers of art become objects of art and therefore subjects of art. ☺

REVIEW
BY
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