Pittsburgh
Jim Campbell
Wood Street Galleries

This survey of electronically based art by Jim Campbell is a testament to the new art of light, characterized by dimly lit, open spaces punctuated by sometimes mind-bending illumination. Such darkened rooms often feel as peaceful as a cyber-space, but in Campbell’s exhibition, the meticulousness of detail in material, image, and form is grounded in reality, time, and space, even as the artworks referenced the larger spheres of information systems and street public space.

"Time & Data" featured 24 pieces, including a public art commission that will remain in place for a year. The accompanying brochure, color catalogue does a good job of reproducing time-based, highly experiential works. The exhibition included LED-broadcast works, electronic sculpture, incorporating found objects, neon-srous installations, and lightbox pieces that collapsed time-based data into single images. The exhibition was beautifully designed and installed and intertwine aspects of the public and the private, with the result that our self-attention was arrested by—images and information flickering in their frames, seeking our attention. It felt something like walking down a city street at dusk or moving through a technologically connected workplace. In other words, it was similar to the way we live now, though personal and opulent.

In some cases, time seemed paramount to meaning and the interpretation of data seemed subject to context, which is to say, not inherently factual or oppressive. In the works shown here, Campbell regularly achieves a resonant balance between personal memory and collective spectacles. In Motion Study #1 (2001), red LEDs glow through treated Plexiglas, revealing a ghostly silhouette lurking along. After a short while, one realizes that its an image of a person walking on crutches, but deciphering the image doesn’t declare it—it remains an apparition, as clear and as elusive as a dream. Antigone #2 (2001), a series of 38 color LEDs and a piece of treated Plexiglas, suspended from a large cabinet, is to suggest, enough for us to follow the action, with our knowledge and memory filling in some of the details of a


perceptions without really rejecting their usefulness or necessity. The exhibition included a wide range of data and information, including sound, video projection, and clocks. In How Not to Read the Bible (1995), a bucket of ants and a dictionary spills the sound of the Bible being read one letter at a time, presenting the point at which the text is broken down into units so small that it fails to convey meaning, or at least the meaning usually associated with it. The gap between text (data, information, representation) and meaning (inherent content as desired by desire, memory, and other subjective factors) is usually graspable and feels like the viewer’s insight because the artist makes the point indirectly. In Portrait of My Father (1996), which shifts in and out of focus with an electronically controlled cycle based on the artist’s breathing, and Portrait of My Mother (1996), which flickers in time to Campbell’s recorded heartbeat, the recorded images and the strongly suggested memories and feelings are pieced to the present through the exquisitely crafted physical presence of the artwork. Campbell has a DS in electrical engineering and mathematics from MIT a couple of decades ago, which may account in part for his attention to materials and form, for which he has an incredible aesthetic sensibility not typically found in today’s electrical engineers.

Campbell’s work often evokes elemental human responses, privileging the human over the abstractly technological. He sees technology in all its complexity.
yet with clarity, as something that is created for a reason, that sometimes takes on a life of its own, and that increasingly occupies our consciousness, in the process becoming an ever greater locus of meaning and of memory.

—Robert Raczka