

This conversation is a compiled and edited version of email conversations with Jim Campbell that took place in December 2009 and January 2010.

STEVE DIETZ I recently reread the essay I wrote for your Site Santa Fe catalog. It focused on the visual liminality of much of your work, but one of the things that has struck me and interested me about working with you on this publication is your commitment to rhythm. This is perhaps particularly seen in *Last Day in the Beginning of March* (pp. 38–41), or *A Fire, a Freeway, and a Walk* (p. 80), and a number of other works, but I suspect it is even more pervasive, or perhaps present, in your creative process. What is rhythm to you?

JIM CAMPBELL I use rhythm to describe a lot of things, some of which I think there are no good words for: an essential or even a primitive way of perceiving or describing movement or sound or both. It's a reductive process; again, both as part of perception and of description. But I think where it gets even more unclear is what I'm interested in. There is an implication of pattern in the word rhythm, but what is it when there is a process that has no pattern? At that point, rhythm is really just a way of describing time or the flow of time. I use representations of rhythms (or time) in my work so much because I believe that by using a truly minimal amount of information an event can be evoked (as opposed to described), and this leaves the viewer's imagination to fill in the blanks. Rhythm is perceived time that bypasses the analytical part of the mind. Rhythms are abstract, but not in the art-historical sense. Rhythm is peripheral vision. Rhythm is what's left when you're staring at something that you're not looking at. Digital rhythms (in my case) are one-dimensional (low-bandwidth) streams of data that are used to modulate something tangible.

SD Your description of rhythm is itself very evocative. I guess my follow-up question is that by using liminality—"a truly minimal amount of information"—as a way to evoke rather than describe, what is the status of the "content" of your work, which I have generally thought of as critical, not just random?

JC I think it's all about context. A sequence that has a pattern to it can have a rhythm, but can still be "noise" as far as content or deciphering is concerned if it has no larger context, whereas a random sequence can have a lot of meaning with the right context. A rhythmic pattern has short-term self-referential context, but not necessarily meaning. Everything that I've done involving rhythm always has the context set by text or images, and without these the works would be random (or cliché if the rhythms are recognizable by themselves). I use "context" information that is precise and taken in analytically to "set the stage" for the rhythm to evoke. I'm obviously not referring to sound or music here, but to visual, time-based rhythms. All of these words that we are using sort of have two definitions: the mathematical and the real world. I'm interested in the area overlapping the two perspectives.

SD I suppose I'm asking two overlapping questions. One is about this "context" of text and/or images. Is it interchangeable to some extent? Could it equally be First Street or Fifth Avenue, *Psycho* or *Citizen Kane*? The other is your interest in the neurophysiology of a viewer's response to the work/context/content. The work is a kind of trigger for an evocative, non-analytic response.

JC It makes a difference as to which works we are talking about. I was really referring to the Memory Works series and *Last Day in the Beginning of March*, where context is everything. With *Last Day* there is the big context of the narrative, which is handed to the viewers at the entrance in the form of a wall label, and then there are the individual descriptions like "Breathing (and coughing)," to make literal the rhythms. I think the only Low Resolution work where the title is important is *A Fire, a Freeway, and a Walk*, which is a very abstract work.

But, yes, I suppose it could be 1st Street or Fifth Avenue, but I have to admit that I've always liked more color field paintings that are called something like "Bluebird on the Aspen Branch on the 4th Day of Autumn" than Untitled #43. I need ways in.

Some of the Abstract Expressionists, if I'm not mistaken, were attempting to communicate the unconscious part of their minds. Some of my attempts are the opposite in that they are conscious

attempts to communicate to, I wouldn't say unconscious, but I'd say primitive parts of peoples' minds, going with the assumption that a primitive pathway connects to a primitive part of the brain.

SD I want to ask you about the Motion and Rest series. Jennifer Bartlett in her response to your work (p. 92) disagrees strongly with any interpretation of these works as exploitive, which I agree with for roughly the reasons she states. They are honorific portraits, if anything. But that still begs the question of why you chose Jennifer and others as subjects.

JC After working in low resolution for a couple of years, I'd started to realize some of the characteristics of the medium or system, and one of the things that I was drawn to most was how the medium distills movement while eliminating details. It seemed like the perfect medium to distill the gaits of people walking, even more so than, say, in Muybridge, where details of the imagery get in the way of the motion study. Growing up with disabled parents in the nineteen-fifties and sixties, I saw, and had myself, prejudiced feelings towards my parents. The culture's responses, and my own as a kid, have never been worked out, so I created these works where one could look at, even stare at, a few disabled people walking without even thinking about them looking back wondering what you were looking at. And the medium works for this in a way that video would not, as there are no faces or details (prejudices, empathy, and sympathy need a face) to orient any feelings towards, just the movement. Perfectly un-PC defining someone by their disability like the signature of a subatomic particle.

SD How did you end up studying film at MIT?

JC I was at MIT as an undergraduate in engineering and became very interested in making films and videos after taking undergraduate classes with some very good teachers, and so I went back there to study documentary filmmaking with Ricky Leacock. Turns out I was more interested in making experimental films than I was in making documentary films, so I was only there for one semester in graduate school.

SD So you started making "experimental films" on your own? Can you describe your 1985 film *Letter to a Suicide* (p. 14) in relation to your subsequent work?

JC I started making experimental films and videos as an undergraduate and continued to do so between undergraduate and graduate school. When I went back to school I found that I was not interested in making *cinema verite* films. My work from those days might be called experimental personal documentary, and that's what led to *Letter to a Suicide*. A close friend that I had met while at MIT, John Gianvito, was putting together a compilation film and invited me to be part of it. The premise was that all of the films would be in the form of a letter. It was called *Address Unknown*. It was the last film or video that I made. There were a lot of reasons why I moved from the medium of film to electronic art. The film which took me two years to make was about my family's response to my brother's suicide. It was a difficult work to make, and after I made it I felt like I needed a change in direction. My film/video making at that time was quite self absorbed. I had seen a couple of shows of Alan Rath's work and was inspired to use my background in electronics to try making electronic art. The first works that I made were essentially a continuation of the themes of *Letter to a Suicide*: that is, people's responses to mental illness.

SD Let's turn now to some of your public art works. *Ruins of Lights* (pp. 152–53), which was installed in 1992 in the America West Sports Arena, in Phoenix, seems not unrelated to works like *Hallucination* (1990; p. 18) in terms of its interactivity. Can you talk a bit about how that project came about, how it works, and, in particular, what lessons, if any, you learned about presenting work in a public space such as a sports arena compared to an art gallery or museum?

JC You're making a good comparison between *Hallucination* and *Ruins of Light* because they both make the same (almost) demands of their audience. Yet when people are in front of *Hallucination* they are there to see it, whereas with *Ruins of Light* people are there for other reasons and so by definition the work is peripheral. Obviously I thought about this when making the work, which is why the analo-

gy that I often use is that the work is like a wind sculpture. It still exists as a sculpture without the wind. *Ruins of Light* needed to be an artwork even without people interacting with it. I was attempting to do an ambient interactive sculpture and the system was such that it only responded to people moving. Anything stationary in the space would not be picked up by the camera system of the work.

I think there are good and bad things about making conventional public art versus conventional non-public art. For one thing public art can be like the Hollywood model of art making, where you have to think about how your audience is going to respond to the work while making it. To me this is polluting to the art making process.

SD Are you suggesting that *Ruins of Light* is a “polluted” work? How does the way in which you think about and went about creating *Ruins* compare to, say, *Broken Wall* (pp. 160–61), or your plans for the San Diego airport, which are also ambient or “peripheral” sites, as you describe them?

JC Nothing specifically has changed in how I deal with making “public” art. Public art has a lot of restrictions which I think are part of the process and should be. What’s changed is that I don’t see public art as art. I see it as design. The creation process is about designing an experience.

SD Correct me if I’m wrong, but while *Primal Graphics* can in many ways be seen as a very large “ambiguous icon,” *Broken Wall*, represents a pretty radical shift, moving into three dimensions, essentially, and breaking the traditional picture plane of an already low-res image. What was your motivation?

JC Before I made *Broken Wall* I was already thinking about breaking away from the two-dimensional plane of the image by creating physically three-dimensional images. The “reconstruction” works that I made were an attempt (in a different way) to come off of the wall. I think it was around then, shortly after *Last Day*, that I started noticing that the two paths that I was going in were converging and *Last Day* was the endpoint of one of these paths and *Broken Wall* was the other. How can the representation of a process or an event

be reduced to an essential minimum? With the Memory Works (by measuring) and with *Last Day* (by creating from scratch) this reduction is done by representing rhythms of detailed processes with one-dimensional streams of data. In these works the static, contextual “hard information” given to the viewers is text. The text, together with the “soft information” of the abstract rhythm, work to evoke an event or a place or a person.

Broken Wall is different. With *Broken Wall* there is a large central image and there are scattered synchronized pixels. Isolated changing pixels are pulled off of the image and set onto the ground. The only thing that these individual pixels can do is change intensity: that is, to have a “time” presence not a space presence (I’m not referring to the glass and steel). These isolated pixels give no real information about the details of the original image, but they do give information about the changes or the time or the rhythm of the original image. So the experiment with *Broken Wall* was: do these scattered dynamic pixels give the viewers something that they don’t get from looking at the main image, or maybe look past when they are looking at the main image? If this is the case then the scattered pixels evoke not the image, but something past the image and different than the image. *Broken Wall* also has soft information and hard information. For *Broken Wall* the soft information is from the scattered pixels. The large image is simply the hard informational context. One important difference between the text/rhythm structure and the image/rhythm structure is time. The reading and interpreting of the text in *Last Day* is a momentary part of the experience receding as the rhythms are felt. With *Broken Wall* the image stays in sync with the isolated pixels such that when the viewers are looking at a group of the scattered pixels, the main image is often seen in their peripheral vision. Because peripheral vision responds to movement more than details, what happens is that a viewer’s peripheral vision is seeing only the movement of the image just as their forward vision is looking at the pixels, which are also only movement. So these two types of vision reinforce each other as they are seeing the same type of thing: time. This structure/idea I see as more related to the works *Peripheral Rhythm* (p. 43) and *Liz Walking* (p. 125).

An image is already a reductive representation. The goal of scattering the pixels was not to refer to or evoke the image, but to evoke

something meaningful that the image as a whole misses, or rather that our analytical interpretation misses.

In a way they are not sculptures in space, but in time. The glass and steel are just the vehicles for spreading out the time or rhythm of the central image and the central image is just the context for felt experience of the work.

SD I just want to make sure I have it clear. The two paths you refer to, exemplified by *Last Day* and *Broken Wall*, are that in *Last Day* the reduction to an “essential minimum” is achieved by combining/overlaying two different one-dimensional streams of data—the text and the rhythm of the lights. In *Broken Wall* the reduction is achieved through the overlay of two ways of perceiving movement—straight on, but reduced to a single pixel and peripherally. Both, ultimately, lead away from space into time, which as you say in your text about *The End*, “the way past the image [is] time.”

JC Sort of. The Memory Works, *Last Day*, and *Sotto Voce* (pp. 158–59) take real world processes from complex things down to one-dimensional representations (and are presented with help from text). *Broken Wall*, *Peripheral Rhythm*, and *Liz Walking* each take a moving image down towards a one dimensional representation (and are presented with help from the original moving image in a low resolution form). The moving image is already a “flattened,” or reduced representation, so together the two representations point back in some way to an imagined process or moment or sequence. In what I’m referring to here I don’t really see text as being one dimensional

SD *Sotto Voce* stands out in many ways from much of the rest of your work. It was also a collaboration. Can you talk about how this specific collaboration worked and how other collaborations in the past have come about? What do you like and not like about collaborating?

JC I have mostly collaborated with friends (or ex-friends). Collaborations are always different for sure. With *Sotto Voce* for Nuit Blanche, in Paris, we were given the opportunity at the last minute to take over the whole of Saint Sulpice for a night. My friend Benjamin

Bergery lives in Paris and was asked if he wanted to propose a work for the church. He had recently seen *Last Day* and called to see if I’d be interested in collaborating on a *Last Day*-type work, where we would create a rhythm in light for each of the eighteen chapels. After many late nights with speaker phones and synchronized flashing lights (so we would both see the same thing), between Paris and San Francisco, we made the eighteen rhythms. And I couldn’t go to Paris, so I did not see the work’s one night of existence. I usually try to collaborate when I’m trying to break out of my narrow perspective, and that’s what works best for me in collaborations; that is, to absorb new ways to look at things. Resolving fundamental disagreements is the hard part of collaborating.

SD Can you talk about the public artworks you are planning for Madison Square Park, in New York City, for summer 2010?

JC The Madison Square Park project is going to be a large-scale, three-dimensional, low-resolution, image-based work. The grid defining the image will be made up of about 1600 light bulbs (with LEDs instead of filaments). The work can be thought about as a two dimensional x-y grid of lights (displaying an image) that has been pulled apart into a three-dimensional partially filled x-y-z grid, such that the final work has no more information than the original two-dimensional grid had. It’s an idea that I’ve had for a long time and goes back to the notion of attempting to stretch an image out of its two dimensional form. It’s related to *Broken Wall* in that both works physically take an image display apart, but they are different in that *Broken Wall* does this by using a reductive and distilling process, whereas this new work uses translation and distortion. Both of them look at what can be revealed by masking aspects of the “original” moving images. In a way the Madison Square Project should have come before *Broken Wall* as it’s the more obvious move from 2D to 3D, which is why it didn’t come first, because it was the more obvious direction!