



BY INVITATION ONLY: ARABELLA CAMPBELL'S FRAMEWORKS FOR PERCEPTION

CINDY RICHMOND ON ARABELLA CAMPBELL

Arabella Campbell, *Taken from there to here to where it came from and taken to a place and used in such a manner that it can only remain as a representation of what it was where it came from*, installation view, 2008
photo: Blaine Campbell

The reductive aesthetic and formal clarity of Minimalism is essential to the work of Arabella Campbell; the omission of extraneous details from her artwork results in a purity of form that is complemented by her subtle experiments in perception. Following approximately fifty years of exposure to the Minimalist aesthetic, purity of form is something that each successive generation must rediscover for itself. Campbell's work is a confirmation of Minimalism's continued vitality. Her monochrome paintings, site-specific installations and sculptures allow her to explore issues implicit to a stripped-down aesthetic and examine the context in which art is experienced.

Campbell's project for Artspeak is a site-specific window installation and a departure from her monochrome paintings. Yet this window installation bears similarities to her paintings. Campbell is interested in painting as a means to an end. To accomplish this, she limits the parameters of her technical process to the essential elements of painting, but in doing so she goes beyond painting to invest it with a situational and conceptual content. The elements foregrounding Campbell's paintings are shape, colour, proportion and, importantly, the frame itself. They are usually drawn out of the specific context of spatial position and the materiality of the work. Some works confront the picture plane with shapes that hint at pictorial perspective. The sum of these elements remind us that it is scale and colour that we look at first and last in her painting, while the precision of her concept directs us to a complex variety of perceptual experiences.

The simple geometry of Campbell's pictorial strategy has taken a new direction in her installation at Artspeak. The long title, *Taken from there to here to where it came from and taken to a place and used in such a manner that it can only remain as a representation of what it was where it came from*, draws attention to the conceptual basis of her work. With a spare number of material means—vinyl text and invitation cards—Campbell makes a language-based installation that is devoid of metaphor or hidden meanings; the vinyl letters and invitation cards are what they are and

nothing more. Yet the simplicity of their arrangement reveals a strategy that opens up a deliberate economy of formal means to explore specific concerns such as process, the performative nature of art, the structural properties of light, and the fact that the conceptualization and formation of ideas are as important as the objects themselves.

When asked of her influences, Campbell referred to the Dutch conceptual artist, Jan Dibbets.¹ Dibbets' work is about movement into deep perspective. His attention to geometric formalism and perspectival inquiry, the contemplation on place and repetition are what attract Campbell. She is particularly interested in how his "perspective corrections" create a spatial tension, and how they highlight the difference between reality and illusion. Campbell shares Dibbets' concern for the relationship between viewer and space, the exploration of changing perspectives, both within the work and that of the viewer. As with Dibbets, Campbell's scheme for the Artspeak window installation is a strategy in perception and perspective.

Just as the structure of the pictorial rectangle is integral to Campbell's paintings, so too is the window frame to her installation. To begin the design for a window-front artwork, Campbell considered "the actual glass of the window, the dimensions of the window...the frame that you look through... [she] was thinking organizational."² And since the window plane is on an angle to the interior gallery wall, she assessed "...that framed space that everyone looks through and how [the glass is] reflected on the wall."³ This interest in perspective includes enhancing or reversing it, and to do this she replicated the actual measurements of the window in a maquette that revealed to her the effect of light cast on the interior-angled wall. The distortion of light was the impetus for the drifting effect she employed in the vinyl lettering on the left window.

Artspeak's façade is separated into two parts by the entrance door. To the left, Campbell installed the

vinyl text, while to the right she mounted a series of exhibition invitation cards on the wall set back from the window. With the vinyl text, she subtly manipulates how we read perspective and provokes the spectator to consider the way we see and think about language and perception. While the phrases that form the vinyl text were appropriated from invitation cards, the perspectival structure references a photograph of a Lawrence Weiner work included in a recent exhibition catalogue.⁴ In the catalogue reproduction, the Weiner artwork is documented from the left, causing the text to diminish into perspective. Campbell's text—a series of phrases commonly used on invitation cards—emulates this effect, by designing the typography to drift into perspective, leading the viewer's eye to the right, to the installation of exhibition invitation cards on the right side of the door.

The invitation card is central to Campbell's interest in the genre of printed ephemera in the art world, and the formulaic phrases and words printed on them. She first introduced the invitation card to her repertoire by reshaping them into tiny box sculptures; she transformed the two-dimensional cards into three-dimensional objects so that in the process their semantic meaning was lost. In this installation, she focuses precisely on the formulaic information that appears on these cards. Campbell's arrangement of the cards from Artspeak's twenty-two-year archive allows the meaning of them to emerge anew. She has arranged them in chronological order—a loose sequence running from left to right and top to bottom. They provide a journey in time, revealing transitions in graphic style, different artistic trends, and poignant moments in Artspeak's history and artists' careers. This format allows the viewer to visually navigate the installation and reveals that despite changes in design or format, the formulaic language never varies.

Exhibition invitation cards are therefore an easily recognizable genre to those affiliated with the art world. They conventionally include the name of the artist, the title of the exhibition, the dates of the

exhibition and vernissage, and the name and address of the hosting institution. There are slight variations in these conventions, but Campbell is interested in the broader social norms and values associated with these set phrases. She identifies the generic component patterns in the exhibition invitation genre, how the text is structured, and the elements of the socio-cultural context that are relevant in the formalities of sending and receiving these cards.

The invitation cards in this window installation direct attention to their social and institutional context and thus comment on the social conventions and publicity frameworks that mediate our engagement with art. Artspeak's window is the primary interface between the art and the public; it frames the relationship between art in the cultural space and the viewer in the street, between the work and the world. Arabella Campbell's installation takes full advantage of the framework of the window to reflect on how we see art as context. It leads us to reflect on the work of art not only as a phenomenon in real space and time and as a poetic lesson in perspective, but also as a complex system of conceptual references that goes beyond the limits of perception. In this work she continues to expand her ongoing experiment with the strategies of Minimalism to open up new sources of content in our experience of art.

Notes

- 1 Interview with the artist, May 1, 2008.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 See *As Far as the Eye Can See*, eds. Ann Goldstein and Donna De Salvo, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, New York: Whitney Museum of American Art and New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007): 143.

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