JIM CAMPBELL
SCATTERED LIGHT

October 21, 2010 to February 28, 2011
Madison Square Park
Presented by the Madison Square Park Conservancy
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In discussions of public art, we often talk of conceptual rigor, formal innovation and ingenious use of materials, of site- responsiveness and interactive attributes, of allusions to history and glimpses of the future. As Ingrid Schaffner’s essay for this catalogue so eloquently demonstrates, all of these qualities are present in abundance in Mel Kendrick’s five Markers sculptures that now grace the Oval Lawn of Madison Square Park. But there is one aspect of public art and the artists who create it that perhaps we discuss less often; one that deserves consideration in any conversation about Markers. That aspect is courage, and having witnessed every step of the evolution of this project, I believe Mel’s courage and conviction merit every bit as much recognition as the qualities of his exquisite work.

It is impossible to overstate the centrality of the relationship of process to product in the oeuvre of Mel Kendrick. His decades of work have resulted in a rich catalogue of sculptures, mostly in wood, that contain the fossil memory of Mel’s touch: innumerable hours spent gouging, digging, slicing, stacking and rearranging, taking things apart and putting them back together again. By contrast, cast concrete—an entirely new material for Mel—requires a huge leap of faith. The artist must let go, take his hands off the work, step back and trust that all the time spent preparing for the moment when the concrete is poured will bear fruit in the form of art that is both new and true, recognizable yet riveting in its unfamiliarity, ready to command the centerpiece lawn of one of New York’s grandest public spaces. In creating this body of work, Mel had the courage to strike out in a new direction and the conviction to see it through.

Markers was made possible by the board of trustees of the Madison Square Park Conservancy, who have so enthusiastically supported our free gallery without walls, and our esteemed committee of Mad. Sq. Art advisors, especially Martin Friedman, who was such a passionate advocate for Mel’s work. Of course, none of this would be possible without the support of our generous patrons, particularly Agnes Gund, Toby Devan Lewis, Ronald A. Pizzuti, The Henry Luce Foundation and our Anonymous donors. We are also extraordinarily grateful to the many admirers of Mel Kendrick who supported the realization of this project, including David Nolan, Jill and Peter Kraus, Gail Monaghan, Francis Williams, Raymond Learnsy and Melva Bucksbaum, Ted Poretz and Wynn Kramarsky.

Mel’s triumph is a testament not only to his skill as an artist but to his character. We are enormously proud to exhibit his work and to witness the exciting engagement of the public with Markers.
In a Hollywood blockbuster, things explode in slow motion with a roaring sound and the viewers are mortified in their seats by the sheer visual intensity. In art, things don’t quite work that way. Jim Campbell, just like many other artists, prefers to leave space for the imagination out of respect for an active viewer. We are granted the necessary time for thinking while walking back and forth. In fact, walking becomes essential to an understanding of his practice. But the most extraordinary feature of his artistic vision is that we have to walk away from it in order to see the full picture, or at least to approach that moment. But those of us, who have been visually impaired all our life and have embraced this sad state of affairs as an almost natural way of being, walking away is not even necessary. For once, the nearsighted among us have the advantage of easily switching modes of perception on the spot. I had that revelatory moment when Jim Campbell asked me to simply take off my glasses while looking at one of his earliest models for Scattered Light. The sharp distinction of detail as seen with glasses receded suddenly into a loss of resolution.

Scattered Light, 2010

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Scattered Light, 2010
and a sharpening of the overall picture. Ever since my moment of epiphany, I have come to grasp just how literally fundamental Jim Campbell’s art is. It is as if we are seeing for the first time that the world is in fact moving.

With or without glasses Campbell’s artistic practice has always been hard to classify, placed somewhere in the gray and hybrid zone between art, cinema, and science. It wouldn’t fit either of these distinct sets of parameters easily and yet it speaks to all three. His art is, however, perfectly positioned to deal with the crossroads of contemporary artistic practice: the blending of different forms of perception, the exploration of cinematic devices in relation to space, the understanding of the image as a social relationship, and the notion of public space and architecture as a transitional communal space. With the Madison Square Park Conservancy commission, the artist has found his most complex and demanding format to date to address the issues of cinema, art, and the public through three public sculptures: Scattered Light, Voices in the Subway Station and Broken Window. But facing the title piece Scattered Light, his most ambitious and largest work ever, we are puzzled by the very simple question: Just what is it – sculpture, cinema, or media art?

To approximate an answer let me look back at the 20th century, the century of film in which visual artists have tried to cope with the loss of a direct relationship to a three dimensional space and the shockwaves of the age of mechanical reproduction which frenetically multiplied the distribution of images in the form of prints, photos, films, as well as more recently the proliferation of digital imaging devices and global distribution. Parallel to these effects of modernity, artists and the industry have always constructed occasions for immersive spatial experiences. They created spaces for the perception and consumption of two-dimensional images, which were either based on the specific architecture and technology of cinemas with their theatrical black box or, in the art context, on the experimentation with installation formats. This spatial relation to the projected image was the driving force behind the 1960s avant-garde experiments in “Expanded Cinema,” a term coined by Gene Youngblood in 1970. The projected film, cinema as we knew it, was taken out of its original context and displaced into spatial arrangements in which multiple projections would compete for the viewers’ attention. Film was all over the space, not just in front of us on a screen, it was real 3-D as in spatial distribution but still opposed to the simulated 3-D Hollywood style. The illusion of 3-D is a fascination that we can trace back to 17th century Baroque anamorphic frescos, or, to cite a more recent example from the 20th century, to the recreational use of a “holodeck” in Star Trek: The Next Generation which premiered in 1987 but was actually set in the far future of the 24th century. In media art, a field one would typically associate
with Jim Campbell’s artistic practice, immersive visualizations through multiple projections or even Virtual Reality environments prefigured the recent crave for 3-D avatars. Historically, media artists like Peter Campus or Dan Graham were first and foremost fascinated by the real-time inclusion of the viewer into the electronic image through their use of closed-circuit video installations. Jim Campbell has participated in this artistic research ever since he first tested the boundaries of image perception by blending recorded imagery and live-images in his interactive closed-circuit installations of the early 1990s such as Hallucination and Digital Watch. The fact that an image could be a hybrid between the live and the recorded was as confusing as fascinating. The reference to these early works is simply a reminder that Campbell’s art has been engaged in questioning the relationship of the viewer to the image from the very beginning. But, in an emphatic sense, can we also be “inside the image” as we are inside a room installation or inside an architectural space? The complete lack of distance, the total immersion into a fictional world, is a strong human desire that also resonates with sculptors and painters, although in a quite different vein. Non-media artists working at the crossroads of image and sculpture such as for example Frank Stella have tried to represent the painted image as an already essentially three-dimensional plane. Their exploration of how to explode the limits of the two-dimensional painting differed from sculpture in that it still played with but also relied upon either the frame and/or the wall as its two prime characteristic features. In contemporary sculpture today we find a strong presence of recycled imagery incorporated into or mapped onto a physical three-dimensional form. It is helpful to keep these divergent references in mind when approaching a Campbell installation, which adds to those influences a sense of musical rhythm and time. Both categories, image and object, do not necessarily incorporate the viewer, but it is now only a small step of trespassing the lawn and we are standing amongst hundreds of light bulbs. Campbell’s exploration of a pixilated and spatially distributed image plane allows for the first time to imagine that we could actually walk through an image, yet we would not perceive the image while we are inside. On the contrary, the lack of perceptual distance intensifies the perception of physicality of hundreds of bulbs hanging like illuminated raindrops suspended in time or like stars, close enough to hold them in our hands, that simply flicker in a series of electric charges to display nuances between on and off. This specific “thing-ness” of Scattered Light is not a technical display mechanism but a conscious aesthetic decision since the artist has actually wrapped contemporary LED digital technology with the old time form that we immediately recognize.

So far, I have made reference to image production in art and cinema but have deliberately avoided the question whether we can talk about an image at all in Jim Campbell’s art: If we accept two conditions which constitute the image, the frame or a recognition of form/figure, then we need to admit that Scattered Light will not...
easily fit these conditions. It is obvious that, despite the necessary
technical infrastructure that helps to suspend 2000 light bulbs,
there is a loss of a unifying frame when image points are scattered
around. Similarly, Voices in the Subway Station represents a
dispersed scan line of an image which files deep under the radar
of figuration or image recognition in favor of a seemingly random
and then again synchronized dialogue between discrete lit objects
as pixels. What we encounter is rather the random positioning of
lights within a field of action or as an exploded plane. Campbell’s
art has clearly moved away from designing a new and fascinating
display system for visual narratives, rather it investigates the
conditions of image perception from a technological point of view
as much as from the public’s perspective.

Campbell’s art has emerged out of whole set of historical
precedents that each have shaped his practice significantly
without providing a single possible reading. Within the narratives
of art history Duchamp and minimalism - think Dan Flavin for
example - but also the emergence of media art in the 1970s have
had a huge impact on Campbell, and within the distinct trajectory
of independent and experimental cinema, the conceptual art
of Michael Snow as well as the haunting aesthetics of Andrei
Tarkovsky’s films have been mentioned by the artist himself. Otto
Piene, who spearheaded the influential Center for Advanced
Visual Studies (CAVS) at MIT in Cambridge, influenced the artist,
who also studied at MIT, in so far as Piene combined kinetic light
objects with an interest in expanded artistic practice in public
space, most notably his sky art events. Again at MIT, researchers
have recently managed to program smart flying objects as
single pixels to align in space to form any picture, an algorithmic
approach to cinematic sculpture that is unprecedented. In
science, the frontier today is thus to dissolve the image in order
to reconstitute it as a performative event in space. What art can
contribute to science is a practice that includes the viewer in its
methodology. And that is where Jim Campbell excels. The degree
to which he is indebted to both traditions of art and cinema equally
is unparalleled in contemporary art. His works embrace the notion
of a relationship to the image as not only time-based but also
context-based set of performative actions.

Media art as a genre has always been at the crossroads of these
two artistic and scientific trajectories, adding to both a practice
of real time representation that was unprecedented within art and
cinema and that specifically addressed the viewer’s presence. To
express it even more pointedly: it is only through artists such as
Dan Graham or Jim Campbell that the notion of the electronic
image can be understood as a social relationship. In another of
Campbell’s early pieces, Shadow (for Heisenberg) from 1993-94, a
Buddha inside a glass cube on a pedestal, the most traditional form
of museum representation, is obscured through turning the glass
into a frosted visual barrier the moment the viewer approaches.
This paradox relationship, that one can only see from afar and only have but a shadowy presence and memory of the form standing in front of the object, has prompted the artist to explore in more detail what it might mean to implicate the viewer’s position. Over the last two decades, he has produced a number of highly successful hybrid works that are situated at the crossroads of still image and moving image, two-dimensional perception and three-dimensional representation (most recently in an amazing series called Home Movies), and of figuration and abstraction. His art doesn’t prescribe the viewer’s position, in fact it might make it even impossible to be at the picture’s theoretical vanishing point. His blurriness is not aesthetic, but conceptual. What he exhibits now at a large scale in a public space is the process of approximating a perception as an active act by the viewer.

Scattered lights evoke scattered subjective memories: a walk through the city at night, an iconic movie scene of haunted or doomed characters, a glowing window with moving shadows.
inside as a promise of belonging and homecoming. Fundamental emotions are touched when shadows move through light. Walking away from Scattered Light, we can also connect to the actual content of the represented cinematic scene, a neutral look at people walking by which is based on a video recording of passengers in the Grand Central Terminal’s lobby, crossing paths while busy leaving or arriving. It could be anywhere, but living in New York there is probably no other more iconic setting that embodies more both the pattern of urban existence and the memories of iconic movie scenes from Hitchcock’s North by Northwest to Coppola’s The Cotton Club. The park in its urban context, however, is a site of potential anxiety at night. Citizens often need company to enter the dark and are ultimately relieved to walk out again unharmed. An illuminated park helps in this respect. The moment I’m writing this text, I can only anticipate its impact on those who will experience the work on site but I almost physically feel the glow of lights and the cool of the fall evening and how all visitors will be mesmerized by a beauty of an object that seems to be frozen in time. And when they finally walk away and look back, they will understand the fundamentals about perception in art and cinema, this indeterminacy of Campbell’s artistic forms oscillating between still and moving, image and non-image. They will come to understand not only the world as something in flux but that they themselves also have to move in order to see the larger picture and become aware of the implied frame.

When the two sides of the equation, the object and the viewer, move at the same time, a constant reconfiguration of the artistic experience takes place. This process of negotiating space in real time is the most essential quality of Jim Campbell’s work. We realize that one has to engage with a work and go to great lengths to ponder the range of possible experiences in the perception of any work of art. We might now feel the urge to walk that extra mile to see from afar, being in New York’s urban setting, from a floor high above Madison Square Park. As the image recedes into the distance, we start to see, and that is a profound cinematic experience. Then, coming back to walk the park with this fresh memory, we approach the work until we are actually inside the picture, and that is a profound artistic experience. Flickering light bulbs are then not an impressionist translation of a low resolution image, but in the artist’s own terminology, an “expressionist” memory of a shadow that has just walked by, a visual rhythm that is full of presence. That is the moment when the shadows of all those anonymous passengers traversing Grand Central terminal mingle with the shadows of all those who once were buried in Madison Square Park in the 18th century.

Rudolf Frieling is the Curator of Media Arts at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.
SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2011 Jim Campbell, Vancouver Art Gallery, British Columbia, Canada
Jim Campbell, Museum of Contemporary Art, Miami Beach, FL
Jim Campbell, National Museum of Photography, Copenhagen, Denmark
2010 Scattered Light, Madison Square Park, New York, NY [cat.]
Electronic Art, Massachusetts Museum & Roanoke College Galleries, VA
Hosfelt Gallery, San Francisco, CA
2009 La Mostra de Arte Fòrum, Palau Pavot i Campell, SBC, Barcelona
Jim Campbell, SBC, Barcelona
2008 Site Santa Fe, Santa Fe, NM; travels to Knoxville, TN
Technology, University of California, Irvine; Museum of Glass, Tacoma, WA [cat.]
Contemporary Art Museum, University of South Florida, Tampa
Wavelengths, Hosfelt Gallery, San Francisco, CA
2007 Electronic Art, Renata Bransten Gallery, San Francisco, CA
Hallucination, Contemporary Center for Contemporary Art, Salem, NC
2002 Electronic Art, Renata Bransten Gallery, San Francisco, CA
1991 Hallucination, Fresno Art Museum, Fresno, CA

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2011 America: Now + Here, ANCH Institute, Americanwarmohere.org (touring exhibition)
2010 Material Evidence, Beach Museum, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS
Ditz/Inner/Outer, Wood Street Galleries, Pittsburgh, PA
Shadow Dance, Kunsthall KaDe, Amsfoort, Netherlands
Wavelengths, American Museum of the Moving Image, Queens, NY
Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore, MD
The Contemporary Museum, Houston, TX
Memory, University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA; Beall Center for Art + Technology, University of California, Irvine; Irvine Museum of Art, Irvine, CA
Contemporary Art Museum, University of South Florida, Tampa
Seeing, Expoloratorium, San Francisco, CA
2002 Zaga Magazine, Nagoya City Art Museum, Nagoya, Japan
Hosfelt Gallery, San Francisco, CA
2001 Time, Space, Gravity, Light, Skibbal Cultural Center, Los Angeles, CA
Surface Tension, The Fabric Museum, Philadelphia, PA
Seeing, Expoloratorium, San Francisco, CA
2000 Time, Space, Gravity, Light, Skibbal Cultural Center, Los Angeles, CA
Future Cinema, ZKM, Karlsruhe, Germany; travels to Kiasma, Helsinki, Finland
Ichiban, San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art, CA
Urban Screens Manhattan 2007, Cornerhouse Gallery, Manchester, UK
2006 Preview, Hosfelt Gallery, New York, NY
Locating the Photographic, Pimloll Gallery, Tasmanian School of Art, Hobart, Australia
Balance and Power: Performance and Surveillance in Video Art, Ros Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA
Crossing the Screen, IMAI, Düsseldorf, Germany
Loopholes, Jim Kempner Fine Art, New York, NY
The First Illusion: The Transitional Object, Palo Alto Art Center, Palo Alto, CA
The Image is the Message, Jim Kempner Fine Art, New York, NY
Edge Conditions, City Museum, San Francisco, CA
The Infrastructure Image, Recent Bay Area Video, Film, and New Media Art on the City, Vancouver International Film Center, Canada
Mixed Media Project, Count Down, Milan, Italy
DAMFestival, Museum of Art and History/University of California, Santa Cruz, CA
Measure of Time, Berkeley Art Museum, Berkeley, CA
Auflosung II Rausch/en / Signal Noise, NGBK, Berlin, Germany
The First Illusion: The Transitional Object, Palo Alto Art Center, Palo Alto, CA
Lineaments of Gratified Desire, Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco, CA

Jim Campbell
State University, Tempe, AZ [cat.]
1998 Reactive Works, San Jose Museum of Art, San Jose, CA [cat.]
1997 Digital Watch, Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City, MO
Reactive Works, Art Center College of Design, Pasadena, CA
1996 Electronic Art, Cohen Berkwitz Gallery, Kansas City, MO
1995 Dialogue, Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco, CA
1994 Hallucination, Contemporary Center for Contemporary Art, Salem, NC
1992 Electronic Art, Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco, CA
1991 Hallucination, Fresno Art Museum, Fresno, CA

Jim Campbell
Tech Tools of the Trade: Contemporary New Media Art, de la Warr Pavilion, Bexhill, UK
2009 Tech Tools of the Trade: Contemporary New Media Art, de la Warr Pavilion, Bexhill, UK
2008 Beijing International New Media Arts Exhibition & Symposium 04-06, National Museum of China, Beijing
Phantasmagoria, Sains Art Center, Salina, KS
Art+Communication: Spectrovia, RIXC, Riga, Latvia
Art Taxi 2008 – Art Tech, National Taiwan Museum, Taiwan
OSI Biennial Superglue, San Jose Museum of Art, San Jose, CA
OL Festival, San Jose, CA

Text Memory, Wood Gallery, Pittsburgh, PA
ArtFact Capturing Time – Mapping the Moment, STUK, Leuven, Belgium
Phantasmagoria, John and Mabel Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, FL
California Video, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, CA
New Frontier, 2008 Sundance Film Festival, Park City, UT
Balance and Power: Performance and Surveillance in Video Art, New Frontier, 2008 Sundance Film Festival, Park City, UT

Jim Campbell
PREVIOUS MAD. SQ. ART EXHIBITIONS.

2010
- Antony Gormley Event Horizon
- Ernie Gehr Surveillance

2009
- Shannon Plumb The Park
  Jessica Stockholder Flooded Chambers Maid
  Mal Kandrick, Markers
  Bill Beirne Madison Square Trapezoids, with Performances by the Vigilant Groundsman

2008
- Ola Lialna & Dragan Espcerschid
  Online Newspapers: New York Edition
  Richard Diacson Assembly
  Tadashi Kawamata Tree Huts
  Rafael Lozano-Hemant Pulsar Park

2007
- Bill Fontana Panoramic Echoes
  Romy Paiva Conjoined, Offset, Erratic
  William Wegman Around the Park

2006
- Ursula von Rydingsvard Bowl with Fins, Czara z Babalkami, Damski Czepak, Ted’s Desert Reigns

2005
- Jane Highstein Eleven Works
  Sol LeWitt Circle with Towers, Curved Wall with Towers

2004
- Mark di Suvero Aaspe’s Fables, Double Tetrahedron, Beyond

2003
- Wim Delvoye Gothic

2002
- Dan Graham Bisected Triangle, Interior Curve
  Mark Dion Urban Wildlife Observation Unit
  Dalziel + Scullion Voyager

2001
- Nawa Rawaunchedak / Taxi
  Teresita Fernandez Bamboo Cinema
  Tobias Rehberger Tsutsumu

2000
- Tony Oursler The Influence Machine
  From 2000-2003, exhibitions were presented by the Public Art Fund on behalf of the Campaign for the New Madison Square Park.

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Adrian Benepe, Commissioner
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MAD. SQ. PK. CONSERVANCY

The Madison Square Park Conservancy, dedicated to keeping Madison Square Park a bright, beautiful and lively park, is a public/private partnership with New York City Parks & Recreation. The Conservancy raises the funds that support lush and brilliant horticulture, park maintenance and security. The Conservancy also offers a variety of free cultural programs for park visitors of all ages, including Mad. Sq. Art.

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