

About Faces: The New Work of Peter Campus

Peter Campus' installations have always precipitated a private encounter with the viewer's image; his newest work, intensely emotional in tone, concentrates on the face.

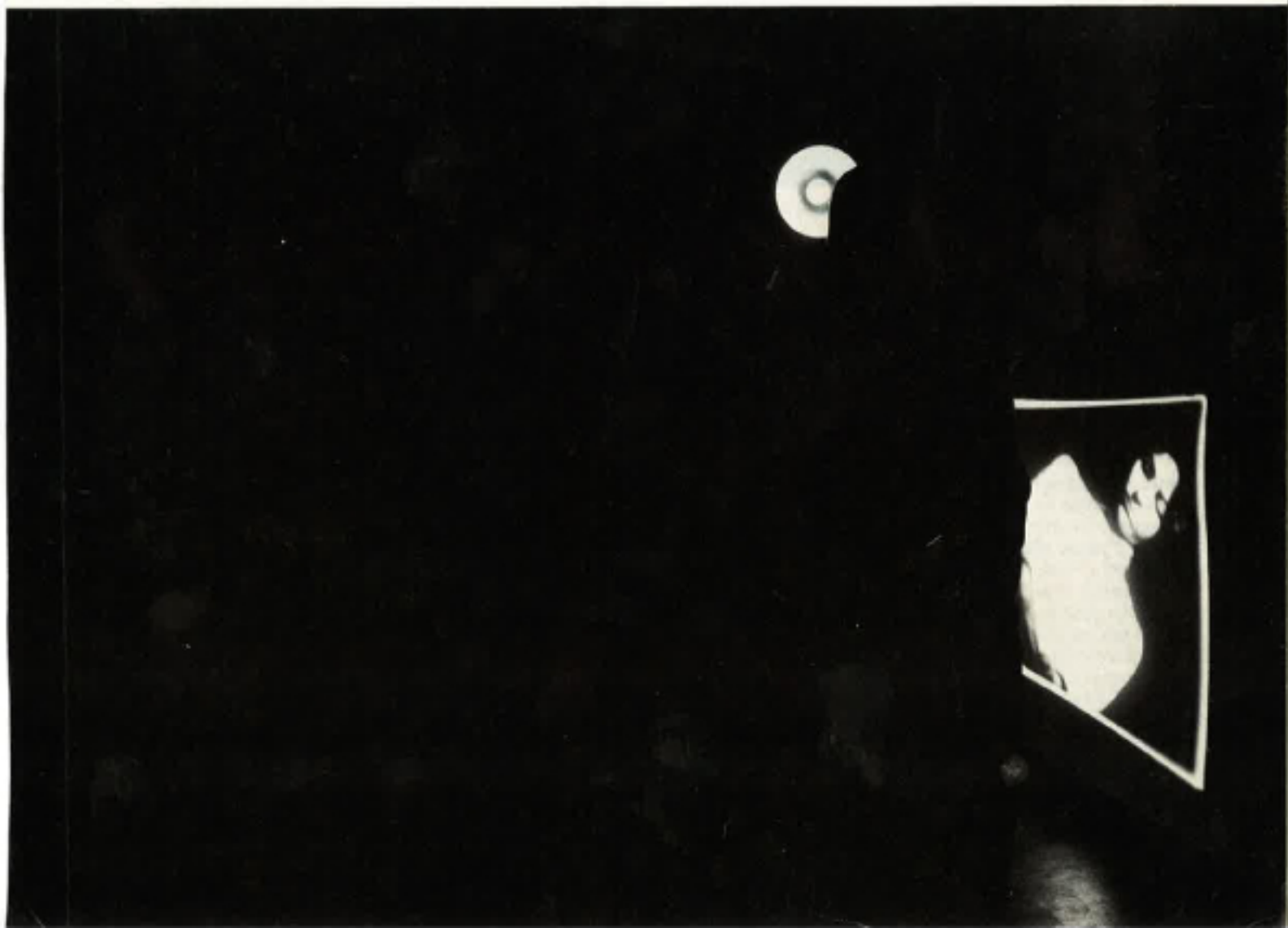
BY ROBERTA SMITH

Peter Campus will be 40 this year. He spent most of the '60s working in film and television production, making one short film of his own in 1966. In the late '60s Campus decided to become an artist and when he actually started making art, around 1970, he quite logically began to work with video. Since his first one-man show at Bykert in '72, Campus has more than made up for his late start. His development has been rapid and sure and his work in video—his short episodic tapes and particularly his closed-circuit installations—is some of the best being done.

Campus' work is distinguished by its combination of a strict formalism with psychological content, the latter stemming

from what might be called, somewhat anachronistically, "figurative imagery"—almost always, the human face (perhaps the ideal conveyor of such content). His videotape images are usually close-ups of individuals executing brief, meaningless actions which isolate, with dazzling precision, some unique aspect of the medium, but which also startle us with their symbolic connotations. Campus' closed-circuit installation pieces, on the other hand, are much too immediate and personal to be symbolic. The installations consist of a video camera and an infrared light, a projector and the light-framed field it projects onto a nearby wall, all in a dark room; they are imageless until you step into camera range. They cre-

Installation at Castell last spring of Peter Campus' *cir*, 1975, which, like his other closed-circuit video works, consists of a low-light video camera (partially obscured by the figure in this photo), an infrared light (at shoulder-level) and a video projector (left) that beams a light-framed field onto a nearby wall. The field is imageless until someone, like the figure below, steps into camera range.





Peter Campus: photos of projected images in *num* (left) and *lus* (right), both 1976, video installations at M.I.T. Photos Mike Moser.

ate a participatory situation you can explore only through your own actions and the complex experience—spatial, emotional, visual and physiological—of your own image.

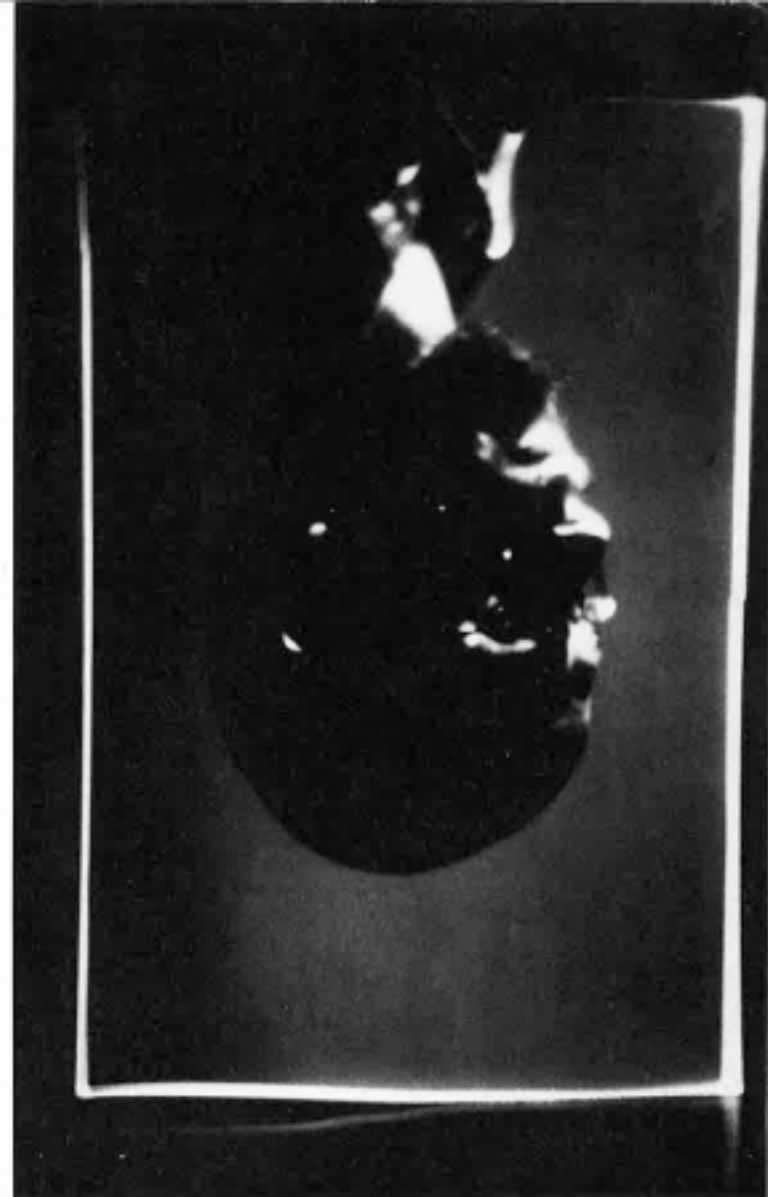
Campus' most recent installation pieces, *num*, *lus* and *aen*, were exhibited, along with several videotapes, this fall at M.I.T.'s Hayden Gallery; *aen* and some tapes formed a Museum of Modern Art "Projects" show during December and January; and this month [March 2 - 19], *num* and *lus* are on view (also along with tapes) at The Kitchen in New York City. These three works are markedly different from the three that Campus showed just last spring at Castelli. In that show, Campus achieved an unusual clarity and control. He brought his equipment in close to the wall, leaving the viewer a delicate slice of space within which to activate each piece. To get within camera view, you had to stand practically against the wall and against your projected image. The images themselves were smaller than usual and brilliantly concentrated, a slightly blurred, high contrast of solid blacks and silvery light, which changed drastically with your slightest move. But despite the imposed constriction, each image (due to the angles of the camera and projector) contained its own illusion of architectural space and distance. The fields of light were small and window-like. Appropriately in two of them, *sev* and *cir*, you saw yourself only from the waist up, as at a window, and in *sev*, where the image was rotated 90 degrees, as you moved into camera range, it was like watching yourself from below moving to an open second-story window. In the third piece, *bys*, Campus inverted the camera so that only an off-kilter, up-

side-down image of your face was visible—an image which also seemed to look down at you from directly above, as if through a small trap door.

Num, *lus* and *aen* developed out of *bys*; in all three you see an inverted image of your head (or at the most, if you are above average height, your head and shoulders). But the buoyant crispness of image and the glamorizing camera angles are gone, and Campus' work, always psychologically loaded because it precipitates a private encounter with your own image, now has this quality in the extreme; this is the most emotional, almost expressionistic work he has done so far. (Even the oblique references of Campus' word-fragment titles have become more emotional and explicit: *num*—numb; *lus*—lust; *aen*—pain.)

As always, these effects, experienced so subjectively by the viewer, have a simple technical explanation. First of all, in his new works Campus has rotated the housings of his projectors so that, instead of the usual horizontal field of light, he has a large vertical one, which suggests a door. Instead of enhancing this architectural sensation with a spatial warp as he did last spring, Campus keeps the space even and frontal, but contradicts our expectations regarding scale. Given the door-sized, vertical field, one might expect to see a full figure upon stepping into camera range; thus, a sudden view of your face, inverted and enlarged to almost four feet (it seems colossal), becomes quite shocking.

The second change is equally mundane technically but even more far-reaching emotionally. Campus has simply started to



Photos from *aen*, 1976, video installation at the Museum of Modern Art. Photos Bevan Davies.

experiment with the placement of the infrared light (rather than leaving it, as it always had been previously, beside the camera), and it is positioned differently in each piece. As a result, the tone of the field varies from light gray to almost black in the three pieces and, moreover, various strange distorting lights and shadows invade your image. In *aen*, your face is in a half-shadow and emerges from (and merges with) a dark field. In *lus*, the light shines up at your face, splitting it horizontally into light and dark halves. The drama of these effects is countered by the fact that the pieces, more than any others, bring you to an absolute, almost regimented, standstill. Whereas before you might move in and out of the piece, watching the spatial changes of your entrances and exits, or move an arm or hand, there's nothing to do here but stand straight, arms at your sides and move your head a bit. The image changes with the slightest turn, but at the same time, you're moving it in and out of shadows, which obliterate or distort your face, destroying its agreeable familiarity and substituting something foreign and sometimes sinister. In some ways these new pieces force us to contemplate ourselves as strangers (as someone remarked at the Modern, "everyone looks the same upside down"); they focus on the most distinguishing characteristic, one's face, and render it less individual. Experiencing the works is a process of locating your face, finding your image among the shadows, behind the mask Campus creates. These pieces aren't comforting, no matter how you look at (or in) them.

Many people at the Museum of Modern Art refused to enter

aen at all, although, predictably, they were perfectly comfortable watching Campus' videotapes on the monitor. If the tapes are easier to take, they still involve some of the scariness of the installation pieces. In fact, this new feeling in Campus' work and the close-up framing of a face appeared first in the tapes of the last year or two. It's clear now that Campus' videotapes, besides teaching you about the nature of videotape, are like drawings, working out qualities and images which find a more profound expression in the installation pieces.

In his tapes, Campus repeatedly builds and destroys images while you watch, masking and unmasking faces—and the illusions of videotape. In an episode from *Four-Sided Tape*, he pulls what seems to be a cap over his face, only to reveal his face again—inverted; a second upward pull leaves the screen black. In the next episode, the black sparkles. It looks like a shot of the night sky, but when a hand appears and sinks into it, the black suddenly shows itself to be a mass of oozing material catching the light. The closing episode of *East-Sided Tape* is similar but reversed: white steam gradually obliterates Campus' face—again an actual material stands in for the blank screen. In *Third Tape*, an actor scatters small squares of mirror on a table while the camera records the cubistic, slightly monstrous, reconstruction of his face in them. These bizarre, static episodes (shorter than TV commercials) make their points and end practically before they begin. They have a duration only slightly more imposed than the installations themselves, which "exist" only as long as you want them to. □