



CAMERA VIVANT: A Conversation with AD Projects

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CAMERA VIVANT, curated by AD Projects, defines the sub-genre of contemporary camera-based artwork in which performance and the camera, both still and moving, intersect. AD Projects created the term *caméra vivant* to refer to narrative, non-documentary images which are staged before a camera with the intention of being seen by an audience as a video or photograph. The medium is imperative to the interpretation of a *caméra vivant*. Not only does the physical production of the image function as a vital element in the narrative content of the work, the viewer is subject to the artist's directive when looking at a video or photograph of a performance rather than being able to choose which aspects of a performance to observe from different perspectives in real time.

Contemporary *caméras vivants* align art-historically with the practice of *tableau vivant*,¹ which originated as a parlor game in 18th century Europe. A traditional *tableau vivant* involved one person or a group of people statically reenacting scenes from history, myth or literature, accompanied by dramatic lighting, sets and props. In the 19th century, photographers like Lewis Carroll incorporated the formal staging of *tableau vivant* into narrative photography which imitated the style of popular painting. Photographers like Cindy Sherman and Laurie Simmons and video artist Jack Smith also referenced *tableau vivant* in their work in the 1960s and 1970s by staging and recording performances for the camera. Today, AD Projects investigates *caméras vivants* as a continuation of this trajectory.

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The following is excerpted from a conversation held by the members of AD Projects on January 23, 2011.

Kat: In this conversation, we will discuss the criteria that an artwork must exhibit in order to be categorized as a *caméra vivant*.

Jill: All *caméras vivants* share three basic attributes: they must be narrative, non-documentary and created using camera-based media. Let's talk about narrative first.

Jessica: In a *caméra vivant*, and in each piece in our show at CUAC, there's the narrative as seen by a viewer of the piece, the narrative as imagined by the artist who is creating the artwork with a specific intention, and also the narrative as experienced by the subject who was enacting the performance.

Kat: And there's another series of narratives evident in a *caméra vivant* ...

Abby: I think about Kuba Bakowski and caraballo-farman specifically in regards to this second layer of narrativity. In Kuba's lightboxes [*Ursa Major, Bobrek Bytom Coal Mine*, 2008 and *Ursa Major, Miedzynarodowa Street 63/66*, 2008] the other narratives include a priori knowledge

¹ *Tableau Vivant* is translated literally from French as "living picture."



that viewers access when viewing the lightboxes. For example, there are different mythologies that different cultures have created to explain the Ursa Major/Big Dipper constellation. Most people that look at an image of a constellation would recall one or more of these myths. They might also think about the implied relationship of these people to one another in real life.

Jessica: caraballo-farman's video [*Through the Garden of Earthly Delights*, 2008], also presents a very social narrative. It's very much about relating your family and your property to that of your neighbors. It has everything to do with what makes us a community.

Kat: Let's discuss the concept of journey narrative or loop narrative. In these types of narrative there isn't really a climax, but there is some kind of technical beginning and end.

Jill: In many of the pieces in CAMERA VIVANT, a non-linear narrative is inevitable when the artist is physically capturing only one moment in time. Unlike cinema, a *caméra vivante* doesn't lead you deliberately through a story arc. For example, when you look at one of Andrea Galvani's photographs [*Higgs Ocean #6*, *Higgs Ocean #7*, and *Higgs Ocean#8*, 2009], and try to figure out what you're seeing, you recognize that it's clearly a story, but you have to be informed about the artist's process before you understand the actual beginning, middle and end to the narrative. There are stories and references in a *caméra vivante*, but you have to delve a bit deeper into the layers of what you're seeing to comprehend the full meaning of the image.

Kat: Let's move on to the non-documentary aspect of the definition of *caméra vivante*. We specify that if a photograph or video is considered a *caméra vivante*, the action should be staged, but not for a live audience. The performance is staged only for the camera. I am specifically thinking about Andrea Wolf's piece, and how it relates to this aspect of our definition since the video is taken from footage that was not staged by Andrea.

Jill: First of all, this aspect of our definition of *caméra vivante* addresses the artist *controlling* a situation, and controlling this staged scene, which is meant to be made into a photograph, or a video, or an installation. The Andrea Wolf piece is definitely an outlier as far as the source material for the video part of her *Tennis* installation is concerned.

Jessica: Yet Andrea has exerted incredible control over what she's showing the viewer. This installation is meant to be seen in a very specific way, in the corner of a room, and she created a platform that serves as an extension into the third dimension of what she's showing us, a physical court that is a counterpart to the court we see in the video projection. So she's actually creating a stage for something that wasn't meant to have a stage, which makes this work much more relevant to *caméra vivante* than it would be if she had just projected a tennis match on a flat wall.

Kat: Let's conclude by talking about camera-based media in relation to the *caméra vivante*. Camera-based media refers very basically to an object that results from the use of a camera. The artwork doesn't have to be a photograph or a video only, but it does have to incorporate one of those elements.

Abby: We're using the photo/video aspect to formally separate *caméra vivante* from *tableau vivant*. A traditional *tableau vivant* is a performance, and seeing an image created by a video



camera or a photographic camera is inherently different than watching a performance in real life.

Jill: Narcissister's videos [*Mannequin*, 2007, and *Russian Doll*, 2007] align incredibly with our definition of *caméra vivante*, as performances clearly staged specifically for the camera. Her videos present us with a traditional stage setting, and she addresses the presence of the camera directly. These videos are good foils to someone capturing a chance occurrence on film, like a video recording of, say, a flash mob, as seen by someone who just happened to walk by.

Kat: So where do we draw the line between a *caméra vivante* and a recording of a performance piece?

Jill: The intervening medium of the camera really affects the way in which viewers are able to experience a performance as presented in a *caméra vivante*. If you were an audience member watching a live performer, you could applaud or boo and potentially change the performer's demeanor or actions, or even walk around her and see her from a different angle. But because Narcissister has put this extra filter of control onto it, we can only see it from a certain perspective as the viewer. That's the important difference between live performance, or even a recording of a live performance made by an audience member, and *caméra vivante*.

Jessica: However, Narcissister does perform these same routines on stage. These videos were filmed in a studio without an audience, but you could potentially see her do the same performance live.

Abby: It's an interesting comparison—Narcissister makes the exact same movements whether performing for an audience or before a video camera, and seeing it in the video context makes it a *caméra vivante*, and seeing it live makes it absolutely not a *caméra vivante*. This comparison really illustrates how important the medium is in *caméra vivante*.

Jessica: Allison Berkoy's installation [*Red Room*, 2010] uses the most extraneous materials in addition to her video projections, so it seems very similar to the way that traditional *tableau vivante* existed. The figures are life-sized and carefully posed, and they have the performative aspect of the projected, moving faces. The figures are very dependent on the lens, but they also seem to be very sculptural and lifelike.

Abby: This also makes me think of Bec Stupak's Jack Smith remake [*Flaming Creatures (Blind Remake)*, 2006], because it's an excellent illustration of how a video, a sequence of moving images, can be linked to a traditionally static performance like *tableau vivante*. Bec's remake, and the original *Flaming Creatures*, are composed of a series of vignettes linked together by the movement of the film. These scenes combine into a visually arresting whole, but they can also be taken as stills, or as small clips, and a viewer can draw associations with outside sources, or imagine a continuation of each mini-narrative.

Kat: So to wrap things up, we've laid out the criteria that define *caméra vivante* because we believe that this kind of camera-based artwork is becoming more and more prevalent in contemporary art. And there is a very clear link between the photography and video that we're showing at CUAC, and other work that exhibits the qualities of *caméra vivante*, with previous



movements in the development of photography and video. These new artists are referencing work that has been made in the past, but are doing so in a way that isn't derivative— they're building upon this tradition of performing for the camera and making it relevant to contemporary viewers.