

DUNCAN CAMPBELL: 'POLITICS SEEPS INTO EVERYTHING'

Text by Charlotte Higgins
The Guardian
2 December 2014

A 54-minute Marxist meditation has just won Duncan Campbell the Turner prize. The artist tells Charlotte Higgins about the dialectics of Christmas stockings, his Das Kapital reading group with Michael Clark – and picking a fight with the British Museum.

Gone is the era – if indeed it ever truly existed – when winning the Turner prize was a pecuniary treat for an already wildly wealthy artist. Duncan Campbell, the Dublin-born, Glasgow-based film-maker, reckons he can “easily” make the £25,000 prize money work “for a year, a year and a half”. He would be lying, he says, “if I said my work flew off the shelves”. Making his kind of work – for which there is “limited demand” is “not good economics”. In his acceptance speech at Tate Britain on Monday night, the artist told an anecdote about his countryman WB Yeats: when the poet was telephoned by a journalist informing him that he had won the Nobel prize, he had without a flicker asked: “Do you know how much it is?” Campbell went on to say, with a twinkle, that he certainly knew how much the Turner prize was. But, he implied, it had a greater value, too: the validation of the panel of judges, “whose opinion means a great deal to me”.

The work for which Campbell won the prize, which was commissioned for the Scotland pavilion at the 2013 Venice Biennale, has much to say about price and value. *It for Others* is, as its voiceover announces, a film about the production, meaning and circulation of objects. It takes its cue and inspiration from Chris Marker and Alain Resnais’ essay film *Statues Also Die* (1953), which examines the colonial commodification of African artefacts (that “death” being the removal of meaning that comes with their plucking from their original religious and social contexts). Organised in three distinct and tightly argued “chapters”, Campbell’s work takes as starting point the African artefacts that Marker and Resnais filmed. It considers the traumas of colonialism and the arguments for repatriation of precious objects from western museums;

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one passage directly takes issue with British Museum director Neil MacGregor's statements on the Benin bronzes. Indeed, Campbell had wanted to film those objects held by the museum that Marker had shot in the 1950s, but negotiations became protracted and time ran out, forcing Campbell to use reproductions instead.

He is fairly sanguine now, but the failure of the British Museum to come through felt "like a total catastrophe at the time", he said when we meet the morning after the prize – the artist looking unusually bright-eyed and alert for a post-party Turner prize-winner. He explains: "The issues kept shifting. As soon as I'd satisfied one set of criteria, then something else would come up and that would be the issue, and so it went on." Though the film is carefully doubt-filled and open-ended, he feels that the debate on the repatriation of objects looted during the colonial period needs further airing, and the BM's schemes to lend to African museums "doesn't settle it".

Perhaps even more striking is the section of the film for which Campbell collaborated with choreographer Michael Clark to express ideas from Marx's *Das Kapital* through the medium of dance. Shooting black-clad dancers from above, the film shows figures shifting and assembling to form shapes that resemble Marx's equations and diagrams, the white ground on which they move recalling a page. Clark, whose work is beloved by the art world, performed in the Barrowland ballroom in Glasgow in 2012, and Campbell sat in on rehearsals. "The really interesting thing is that there's always a point at which the performers take to the ground. So if you are sitting far enough up, this kind of other space opens up," he says – a different world of shapes and gestures from that visible at stage level. Part of the attraction of working this way was formal and aesthetic: Campbell likes an equation and has made – unlikely as it may sound – animations of statistical diagrams in previous films. It is also, perhaps, a way of putting the human body and its labour directly into Marx's labour theory of value. For research purposes, he and Clark formed a small but committed reading club devoted to *Das Kapital*, much aided by the lectures posted online by NYU professor David Harvey. "We would read one chapter, maybe three, and then watch the video," he says.

It for Others is, as you may have gathered, a piece of art unusually committed to tackling economics, history and politics – though not surprising, perhaps, for someone who has previously made films about contested representations of the Irish civil-rights activist Bernadette Devlin and the economic theories of Hans Tietmeyer (president of the Deutsche Bundesbank when the euro was introduced in 1999). Growing up in Dublin, but more pertinently studying in Belfast, the 42-year-old found that contested histories and freighted symbologies were never far away. "Symbols weren't just symbols – they were realities, and they could be life or death," he says. He notes, with a laugh, that it was only during a spell in borstal in England that writer Brendan Behan discovered "what Oscar Wilde was put in jail for – he had always thought he

was there for being a great Irish patriot”.

In other words, for better or worse, “politics seeped into most things”. *It for Others* charts the way that a famous image of Official IRA activist Joe McCann – as photographed in the midst of battle, in heroic relief with a gun resting on his knee – these days finds its way on to mass-produced Christmas stockings emblazoned with the word “resistance”. As a result of which translation the obvious Irish politics have leaked away. But not the politics of production: Campbell follows up with a shot of a vast Chinese textiles factory, a thousand sewing machines thundering industriously.

Campbell has lived in Glasgow since 1996. If any rough barometer reading may be taken from this year’s Turner prize, it is that London is increasingly unviable as a place for young artists to make work. None of the shortlisted artists are based in the city. Two of them – Campbell and printmaker Ciara Phillips – live in Glasgow, and three of the four studied at Glasgow School of Art. Glasgow’s importance as a centre for artists, already well-established, seems, if anything, to be waxing. Not the least of it is, as Campbell points out, “to do with economics – relative to London, it is far cheaper to live. Particularly when you graduate, you can end up in a vicious circle where you have two jobs to pay for a studio that you never get to because you have to have two jobs to get to it. So Glasgow on a basic level affords you the space and time to develop.” Next year, the Turner prize will be shown on the south side of Glasgow, in the Tramway: in a curious way, it will almost seem like a homecoming, given the Glasgow-connected artists who have recently won or been shortlisted for the prize – Richard Wright, Susan Philipsz and Martin Boyce among them. Meantime, London risks pricing itself into increasing irrelevance.

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/dec/02/duncan-campbell-turner-prize-2014-interview>