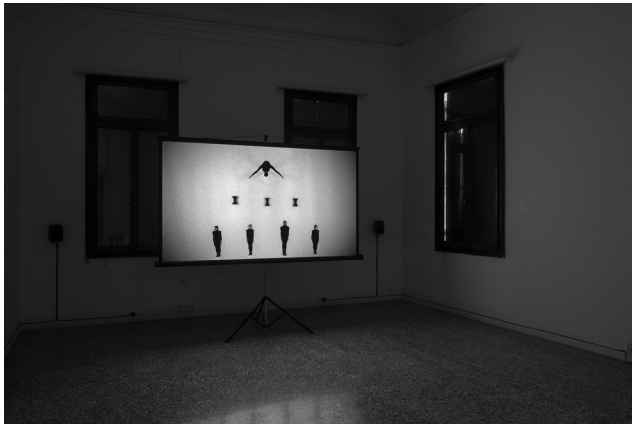
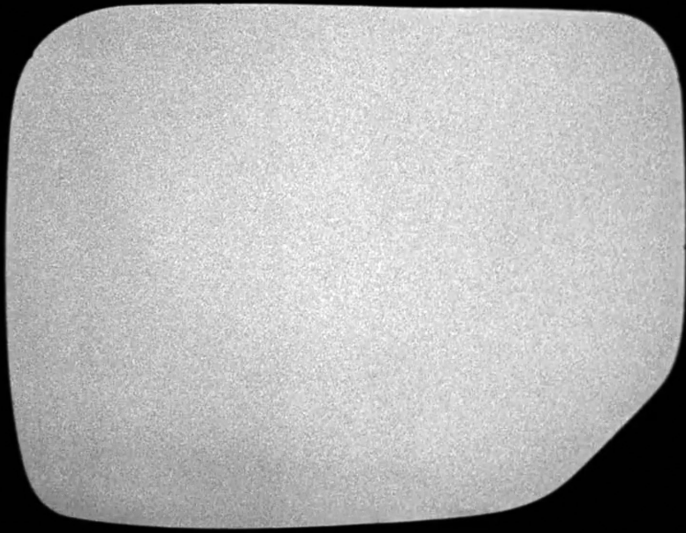


# *It for Others,* Being for Itself

At the beginning there is nothingness—a few seconds pass with just a plain black screen. A female voice breaks the stillness, speaking philosophically: “Objects exist outside of us.” She continues, “It is the confrontation of mind with matter that brings an object into being,” as a white frame within the black screen appears—an object has come to being (fig. 1). A second white frame, a second object, enters the frame and lies over the first object, as we hear, “Through their use they provide subsistence, satisfy other human wants, and become the means and processes to produce more objects.” These grand and acontextual assertions come to an end as a third white frame—a third object—emerges, accompanied by the final stipulation: “The wealth of our societies exists as a vast accumulation of objects.”

The Irish artist Duncan Campbell’s fifty-four-minute essay film *If for Others* (2013), made for the Scottish Pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale, strikes a philosophical note with these first four lines before embarking on a mind-boggling journey through historical, political, economic, and aesthetic dimensions, to a final shot that symbolically references death (fig. 2).<sup>1</sup> *IfO* achieves more than merely fitting its complex layers into a succinct format. Rather, *IfO* attempts to transcend its own limits by situating itself and its viewers within the grand historical context it depicts. *IfO* wants to meet its viewers in the present, subject to subject, in some



**fig. 1** Still from Duncan Campbell. *It for Others*. 2013; 16mm and analogue video transferred to digital video, 54 min.

**fig. 2** Duncan Campbell. *It for Others*. 2013/2014; Installation view. Palazzo Pisani. The Common Guild, 55th Venice Biennale 2013.

sense fulfilling the artist's wish to display himself as a pre-objectified subject.

<sup>1</sup> The Scottish Pavilion of the 55th Venice Biennale was organized by the Common Guild for Scotland + Venice 2013 in the Palazzo Pisani (Sta. Marina). Outset Scotland supported the commission of new work by Corin Sworn, Duncan Campbell, and Hayley Tompkins. Scotland + Venice is a partnership between Creative Scotland, British Council Scotland, and the National Galleries of Scotland.

Campbell, born in Dublin in 1972 and currently based in Glasgow, has won international praise for his works, which often use archival footage to investigate the politics, economics, and social structure of his own historical context, Northern Ireland.<sup>2</sup> In turn, he ties his subjective experience to larger philosophical ideas related to difference, otherness, and subjectivity. In 2014, the British art world awarded Campbell the prestigious Turner Prize for It for Others. The irony is that IfO not only explicitly criticizes the cultural and economic milieu in which it has achieved success, but it also embodies Campbell's sentiments concerning the persistent colonial attitudes governing the British art world in general, and the British Museum in particular.

<sup>2</sup> Campbell's film *Bernadette* (2008) presents an open-ended story of Bernadette Devlin, the controversial Irish civil rights activist. The work fuses documentary and fiction in order to expose the fixed representation of reality in documentary form. To similar effect, Campbell's film *Make It New John* (2009) tells the story of the American automobile engineer John DeLorean, his legendary DMC-12 car, and the workers at the West Belfast plant where it was produced between 1981 and 1982. His film *Fall Burns Malone Fiddles* (2008) presents a series of black-and-white still images of young working-class people in Belfast in the 1980s, sourced from the Belfast community photographic archives.

IfO expresses a cinematographic critique of colonialism and the commodification of art. It features an array of artifacts from Africa; a dance performance by the Michael Clark Company; images of banal household objects; archival footage from Northern Ireland; and contemporary art objects that are for sale. It also references numerous artists and filmmakers, among them Chris Marker, Alain Resnais, Stephen Shore, and Sergei Eisenstein—each of whom, in different ways, is or was invested in a critique of commodification and capitalism.

In the first section of the film, which reenacts Marker and Resnais's 1963 essay film Les Statues meurent aussi (Statues Also Die), Campbell proposes that colonial subjects are historically forced by their colonial contexts to create their own forms of self-expression.<sup>3</sup> In the performance by the Michael Clark Company (in part two of the film), Campbell explores how economic and political interests lie behind the formation of colonial and postcolonial contexts that breed colonial subjects. In "The General Object" (part three), he shows how these economic and political interests perform their dark operations to advance cultural imperialism. In "Reflexes,"

the final section, Campbell reveals that he is a colonial subject, too. He achieves this in two steps: first, by demonstrating that Northern Ireland is a colonial society and that Campbell regards himself as having grown up as a colonial subject under British rule; second, by revealing that the British art world remains a colonial context and that Campbell, as a colonial subject in the British art world, is forced to self-express within it. IfO is Campbell's self-expression in the language he has chosen—the language of art.

3 Colonial subjects are forced to self-express in the sense that they are pushed beyond their limits and given no other option than to react.

In Being and Nothingness (1943), Jean-Paul Sartre discusses the interrelated notions of “being for others,” “being for itself,” and “being in itself.” Briefly and in a simplified manner, we can think of a “being-in-itself” as an object whose value is self-evident, closed within itself. A “being-for-others” is a social being, one whose value is defined by others; its being is for others to determine. Colonization causes colonized peoples to become beings-for-others, since their consciousnesses are defined by the colonizers. Lastly, a “being-for-itself” is one who resists being defined by others and seeks to claim self-definition. Sartre’s “being-for-itself” is more or less synonymous with my use of “subject” in this essay. In fact, at the end of Campbell’s chapter “The General Object,” we are told through the voiceover that there is a materialist interpretation of “soul,” which amounts to a materialization of the Sartrean notions within IfO. Campbell materializes his views on the problem of display by yielding IfO as a being-for-itself (i.e., a subject that resists being-for-others or existing as an objectified colonial subject) because, given the philosophical obstacles and historical context, this is the only way in which an artist can resist.

Campbell acknowledges the contradictions in his approach, speaking in voiceover in the film:

And how can one person suppose to speak for these objects? That includes him, me, whatever proxy, does it matter? What should I say in order to have nothing further to say? But why say anything? It seems only natural once the idea of obligation has been swallowed that I should interpret it as an obligation to say something.

Instead of remaining silent in the face of paradox, Campbell attempts to decipher the indecipherable. His film self-referentially addresses its own making and itself as a moving-image museum displaying objects. It performs and responds to fundamental issues concerning the display of objects. Since a display

is a presentation of something that originates in another context, displaying something as it is prior to the framing act is impossible; the act of displaying is itself a recontextualization as well as a decontextualization. In order to represent something, there must first have been a presentation in the native context. Like Marker and Resnais, Campbell proposes that museums, as places of representation, perform recontextualizations that lead to the impoverishing and imperializing of cultures.

The philosophical opening of *IfO* historicizes its discussion by contextualizing the objects it presents. The female voice speaks again: “This is a film about objects. It refers to another film about objects, specific African objects: a ballad of their mortality and death: Les Statues meurent aussi.” Les Statues meurent aussi offers insight into the damaging cultural impact of colonization on African art as it is perceived by Westerners, removed from its original source and objectified (fig. 3).<sup>4</sup> Les Statues functions as a gateway through which Campbell enters into issues revolving around colonialism; in thinking historically, he turns the discussion from the African objects displayed via Les Statues to Négritude, the postcolonial resistance movement born in the 1930s in reaction to cultural imperialism. As stated in the voiceover: “The instance when difference and identity become the interface for one another is part of a larger moment: Négritude.” The literary theorist V. Y. Mudimbe defines this emergence in dialectical terms: “The alienation caused by colonialism constitutes the thesis, the African ideologies of otherness (black personality and Négritude) the antithesis, and political liberation the synthesis.”<sup>5</sup> The alienation caused by colonialism imposes otherness on a subject who comes to the realization that, as the target of the Western gaze, they are being colonized and objectified. As a form of resistance to becoming beings-for-others—i.e., in an attempt to become beings-for-themselves—colonized subjects desire “to decipher the indecipherable.” One resists being objectified, yet this resistance takes form in being objectified by the self. In sum, to escape being objectified, the colonial subject self-objectifies.

<sup>4</sup> *Les Statues meurent aussi* (*Statues Also Die*) was commissioned by the journal *Presence Africaine* in 1950. Now recognized as an early instance of anticolonial film, it was viewed as a threat by the French government. In 1953 the film was submitted to the censorship commission of the Centre Nationale de la Cinématographie (CNC) and banned outright. Film historian and Marker scholar Catherine Lupton states that *Les Statues* shows how colonialism and its effects, including objectification and appropriation, effectively kill African art: “*Les Statues* argues that colonialism murders African art by severing its roots in traditional ways of life, consigning it to the graveyard of Western museums and degrading its forms into mass-produced tourist kitsch that no longer expresses a cultural purpose—a prayer, as the commentary puts it—for the people who make it.” Catherine Lupton, *Chris Marker: Memories of the Future* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005), 38.



**fig. 3** Chris Marker and Alain Resnais, *Les Statues meurent aussi* (*Statues Also Die*), 1953/2014; Installation view, The Common Guild, 55th Venice Biennale 2013.



**fig. 4** Duncan Campbell, *It for Others*, 2013; still from 16mm and analogue video transferred to digital video, 54 min.

<sup>5</sup> V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington, Indianapolis, and London: Indiana University Press and James Currey, 1988). Quoted in Okwui Enwezor and Chinua Achebe, *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945-1994 (African, Asian & Oceanic Art)* (Munich: Prestel, 2001), 11.

This paradox of Négritude is explained in a voiceover in *IfO*: “Négritude had to make do with a certain drift and delirium of the mystical and the concrete.” The Négritude movement is emblematic not only for its subject matter, blackness, but also for being a movement of resistance, with which Campbell identifies. Négritude is the resistance of a particular oppressed people, but it shares traits with all resistances by the oppressed to their oppressors. Okwui Enwezor reiterates Sartre’s emphasis on this:

Sartre saw the Négritude movement as the moment of separation, of negativity, similar to the “antithesis” following the “thesis” of the colonial situation and preceding the “synthesis” in which not only blacks but all oppressed people would unite and triumph over their oppressors.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Enwezor and Achebe, *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945-1994*, 11.

Négritude is a particular case of colonial subjecthood, and in talking about it, Campbell is indirectly talking about his own colonial subjecthood. Campbell suggests that he is a colonial subject forced to express his resistance as an Irish person operating in the British art world.

Campbell acknowledges his paradoxical yet hopeful task: “But this negative moment is not sufficient in itself, as the people who employed it knew; they hoped to prepare the way for the realization of a human society without racism.” In the next line, Campbell declares the extent of his commitment to resistance through Négritude and its analogous forms: “Négritude is dedicated to its own destruction.” This line reads as a confession of Campbell’s paradoxical embrace of self-objectification as a means of resisting objectification by another.

*IfO* operates as Campbell’s stage on which he displays his historical context, embedded in a larger history against which his colonial subjecthood reflexively comes into being. Campbell provides his viewers with fragmented but associated contents, often pointing to the ways in which the fragments are linked by referencing his own process of making *IfO*, and by referencing those who influenced him. Through montage, voiceover, and other techniques whose “comings and goings” catalyze this interplay of concepts, Campbell’s film forces us to attempt to decipher the “indecipherable.”

Campbell often shows disembodied hands entering the cinematic frame holding photos as a way to present the indecipherable





**fig. 5** Duncan Campbell. *It for Others*. 2013; 16mm and analogue video transferred to digital video, 54 min.



**fig. 6** Duncan Campbell, *It for Others*, 2013; Still from 16mm and analogue video transferred to digital video, 54 min.

**fig. 7** Stephen Shore, *Granite, Oklahoma, July 1972*, 1972; C-print, 5 x 7  $\frac{1}{2}$  in.

# THE GENERAL OBJECT



**fig. 8** Duncan Campbell, *It for Others*, 2013; Still from 16mm and analogue video transferred to digital video, 54 min.

yet powerful effects of the circulation of images, including IfO itself, in everyday life (fig. 5). The indecipherable creeps in; what we see and what we hear demands that we seek something that isn't there. The more material that unfolds, the more the viewer seeks a solid foundation, yet IfO never explicitly provides such ground. The viewer thus experiences the multidimensional work from an aesthetic perspective, and it is from this viewpoint that Campbell's subjective world is illuminated.

The experience of engaging with IfO as a subject-like object is made possible by very particular features of the film. Reflecting a multilayered picture of reality, IfO is not just fragmented in its subjects and ideas; it is also multidimensional in form. Its collection of objects and references not only constitutes a multisensory (i.e., audiovisual) material experience but also invites multiple associations.

For example, Campbell re-creates an image by photographer Stephen Shore in which a cup of coffee sits on a light wooden table. In Campbell's film, a hand enters the frame and puts the cup on the table (fig. 6). The hand then enters the frame again and puts Shore's photo into the same frame, making the frame we are seeing a frame within a frame. At the same time, we hear the following line: "...the elements—the material objects of his comings and goings serve as points of departure for the forming of associations through which the play of concepts becomes possible" (fig. 7). Campbell generates a complicated referential connection between the re-created cup and its original image; he thus leads us to see, as explicitly as possible through moving images, how his film enables its disclosure to the viewer by depending on associations.

Campbell acknowledges the difficulty of his task as he reveals the general structure guiding his creation: the method of dialectics. He says: "It's still very complicated to think in extra-thematic imagery, however; to show the method of dialectics." Campbell thus quantifies the major segments making up IfO and re-affirms the associative links among them. "This will require four or five non-figurative chapters," he says.

The opening portion of the section titled "The General Object" demonstrates IfO's aims in action. We see a hand putting a can labeled "Campbell's Tomato Soup" into a plain and simple setting, while the words "The General Object" appear in a large white font (fig. 8). The voiceover says: "It's settled: we're going to film commodities, on Marx's scenario about commodities—the only logical solution." As the scene references the mass reproduction of commodities, the same hand returns the can to the same spot again. Campbell wants the viewer to think historically by reevaluating new material as it appears and re-assembling all past materials from the vantage point

of the present; he wants the viewer to think about the whole film as an object within the context of the contemporary art market.

Looking carefully, we see that, on the product's label, between the words "Campbell's" and "Tomato Soup," another word exists, one that could go unnoticed: "condensed." The object that we look at is "Campbell's condensed." IfO visually references itself, in the sense that the film contains a condensed version of Campbell, the artist. Just as Campbell makes use of repetitive images to signal abstract notions, he uses other still images to signal his most abstract ideas; the voiceover says: "The maximum abstractness of an expanding idea appears particularly bold when presented as an offshoot from extreme concreteness—the banality of the stuff of everyday life."

Campbell creates IfO as his Trojan horse. Though Campbell displays himself for others, IfO is not for others because it is for itself—and for Campbell. Hence, Campbell, who is a being-for-itself, expresses his colonized being as he subjectively experiences it. The "I" of the title is for itself. IfO is a being-for-itself whose being is resistance; its life is the film's duration, and it dies at the end of fifty-four minutes. The film makes others aware of what has been happening all along: they have been determining IfO's being, unbeknownst to themselves. Through repetition (as in the Campbell's condensed scene) and faith in the viewer's ability to create associations, the artist pushes the viewer to recognize the ways in which she has been complicit with the process of objectification.

IfO is a being-for-itself in that it determines its own being in its world, the art world, where it is of course objectified by the art market. IfO has been evaluated by the art world in terms of a prestigious prize with a monetary value—a £25,000 award. Presciently, IfO foresaw this evaluation of its worth. Amusingly, in the last minutes of the film, while the art market is being discussed, some books are laid on a table; one title reads "Pricing the Priceless," as the voiceover declares the "objectifying effect of pricing" as a closure on an inherently open being.

We come to see that IfO does not consider itself to be historically unilateral, exclusively directed toward the past; rather, it thinks of itself in terms of possible future histories. Based on the film's historical context and its lessons, it predicts the way that beings are valued in economic terms. IfO embodies the multidimensionality of the reality it portrays, blurring the polarities of subject and object, form and content, life and death.