

# Art in America

February 2003

## Beth Campbell at Roebling Hall

Beth Campbell first received broad attention for her quirky textual drawings in which a single narrative event written at the bottom of the page branches upward and outward into many possible scenarios, some lovely and some dire, some mundane and others outlandish. In one such work presented here, Campbell's discovery of a gray hair at a relatively young age triggers a contradictory jumble of potential events and identities: she settles down and gets married, is wracked by anxiety, joins a religious cult or becomes a muscle-toned health nut, to mention just a few of the outcomes described. Also included in the exhibition were color photographs of dresser tops with a conceptual twist. Rather than offering one each of lipstick, mascara and blush, the dresser tops present two or three identical examples of these items in orderly rows that suggest both mirror reflections and multiple faces to be made up. But the show's real attention-getter was Campbell's first foray into video—a medium that suits her richly imaginative, and willfully neurotic, inquiry into the slipperiness of selfhood.

Campbell's 15-minute video, *Same as Me* (2002), involves three adjacent projections, each purporting to chronicle a day in her life, from waking to sleeping. These scenes were culled from months of shooting, and it's difficult to determine what actually occurred during Campbell's normal life and what she diligently enacted, so well does she mix daily activities with highly self-conscious performance. You see Campbell stretching in three beds, showering in triplicate, breakfasting (at Wendy's, in a

diner and at home), then going about her routine, before dining romantically with her lover, convivially with a group and then forlornly in her apartment. Everything occurs in unison across the projections, including sipping coffee, glancing a particular way and walking down the street—all to hilarious effect—yet Campbell's particular traits from one projection to the next also suggest markedly different psychological states, and very likely different identities. All this activity takes place in divergent locales, from desert landscape to pleasant suburbia, midtown Manhattan streets and European cities, making it seem, freakishly, that Campbell is indeed inhabiting several lives. She's an artist, a suburbanite, an urban career woman in a power suit, a tourist from the heartland enjoying the wonders of a national park. Taken together, these multiple scenarios suggest a nagging series of "what ifs." What if I had decided otherwise? Would things be better or worse? Would I be the same or another person?

Campbell's excruciatingly banal daily travels are strangely engrossing, especially given their anti-slick presentation in a video that has some obvious glitches. Myriad visual cues, such as clothing and apartment decor, evoke the contours of her hypothetical lives, and Campbell herself is riveting, with her peculiar way of seeming at once ultra-obvious and enigmatic. As happens with Campbell's drawings, a near-nutty self-absorption moves way beyond solipsism to tap deeply into raw questions of what is constant and what is mutable about the self.

—Gregory Volk

Beth Campbell: *Same as Me*, 2002, three-channel video installation, 15 minutes, 20 seconds; at Roebling Hall.

