MOVING POEMS MAGAZINE
NEWS AND VIEWS ON POETRY FILM, VIDEOPOETRY, AND RELATED GENRES

INTERVIEW: LEE CAMPBELL – FILMMAKER, POET, PERFORMER

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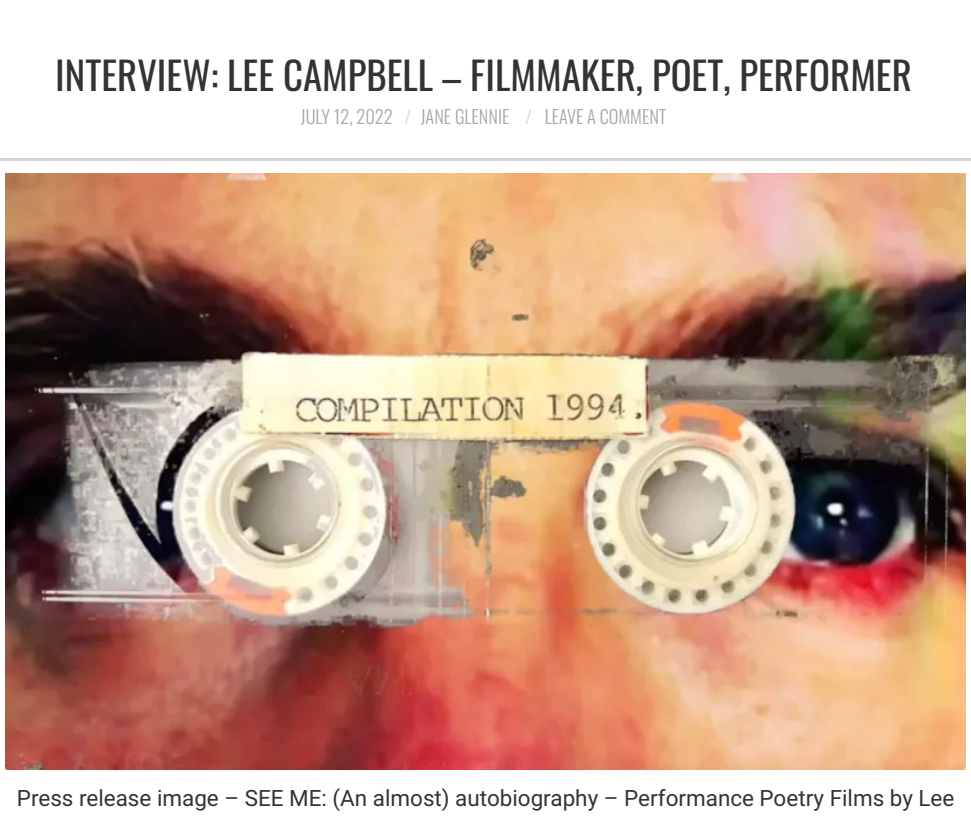


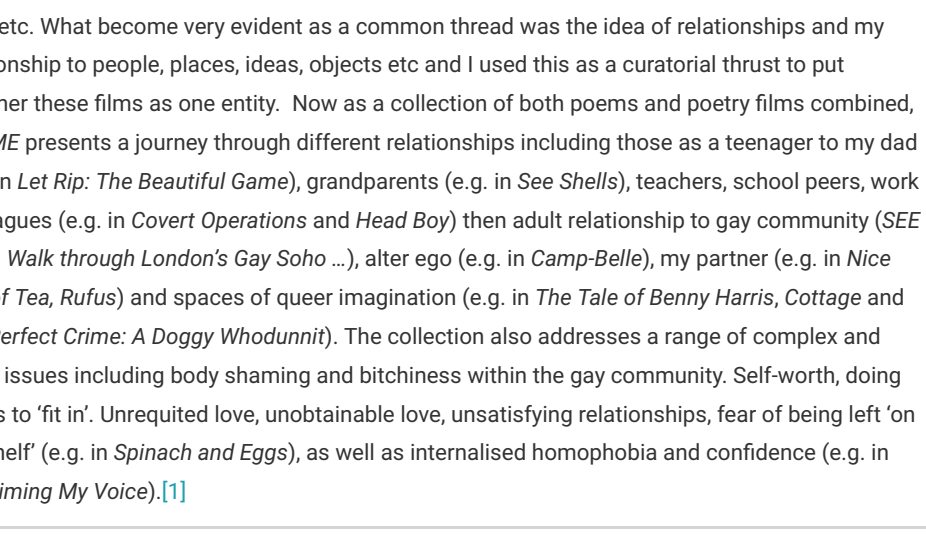
Press release image – SEE ME: (An almost) autobiography – Performance Poetry Films by Lee Campbell July 26–31, 2022. Pop-Up Exhibit – Fountain Street Gallery, Boston

I first came across Lee Campbell's work by chance in a Margate (Kent, UK) shop window early in 2022. It was part of a group show in (I think) a long gone Woolworths. I was initially attracted by his use of lettering in his film. I found him on Instagram and watched more of his film work on his website, and discovered recordings of his incredible Zoom performances. I decided to interview him and this is the result … Rather conveniently, a few days after Lee had responded with his answers we were lucky enough to meet in person at the Absurd Art House Film Festival in another Kent seaside town – and I could thank him in person.

His pop-up solo show will be in Fountain Street Gallery in Boston from 26-31st July 2022.

Congratulations on your solo show "SEE ME: (An almost) autobiography," coming up in July in Boston (USA). Did you conceive the work in the show as a collection from the outset, or did it evolve into it?

Thank you! I am really excited about it as I am pulling these films together into one collection lasting just over an hour in duration for the first time – and to show these films in North America, in a city which I have been to, and love, is a real honour. No, the collection of works on show has evolved over time. Between 2019-2021, I made a series of short films which recycle my personal archive of artworks as an artist of 25 years into the present. *Let Rip: A Personal History of Seeing and Not Seeing* (2019), *Let Rip: The Beautiful Game* (2020), *Let Rip: Teenage Scrapbook* (2021) and *Let Rip: Bodies Lean and Ripped* (2020) use the 'rip' as both metaphor, symbol and filmic structure to build upon existing work, create new forms out of 'old' practice and indeed show new versions of 'old' me. This meant creating surfaces and layers on the screen which I would appear to be ripping or tearing apart to reveal something about myself. Cascading through different time periods but really speaking to the present, these films play with the sensations of an image, aiming to capture how reality is constructed of images, images that are out there in culture but also personal images that I create myself. Creative green screen usage in films has been around forever and could be said to feel retro but in these films, as I do with most of my films, I have employed green screen to create textural surfaces and review history. In 2021, I then integrated poetry into these existing moving image works to become poetry films. These poetry films sat alongside a body of poems that I had written about my personal history of seeing and not seeing as a working-class gay British man, to confront the politics of seeing and underline how validating seeing can be, but also the difficulty of not being seen. Whilst I was gaining really positive responses from audiences of me reading these poems as I regularly performed them around various venues in London and further afield, at the same time I produced poetry films of my poems to sit alongside but to also use the visuals within them to offer new/alternative ways of understanding what is being said in the spoken poetry. I then started to make connections between the different poems/films that I was producing. I noticed that underpinning all the work is a love of the absurd, the humour and the comedy to be found in the banal, the mundane and the everyday, as well as ideas as I mentioned above pertaining to acts of seeing, being seen, not being seen etc. What become very evident as a common thread was the idea of relationships and my relationship to people, places, ideas, objects etc and I used this as a curatorial thrust to put together these films as one entity. Now as a collection of both poems and poetry films combined, *SEE ME* presents a journey through different relationships including those as a teenager to my dad (e.g. in *Let Rip: The Beautiful Game*), grandparents (e.g. in *See Shells*), teachers, school peers, work colleagues (e.g. in *Covert Operations* and *Head Boy*) then adult relationship to gay community (*SEE ME: A Walk through London's Gay Soho …*), alter ego (e.g. in *Camp-Belle*), my partner (e.g. in *Nice Cup of Tea, Rufus*) and spaces of queer imagination (e.g. in *The Tale of Benny Harris*, *Cottage* and *The Perfect Crime: A Doggy Whodunnit*). The collection also addresses a range of complex and tricky issues including body shaming and bitchiness within the gay community. Self-worth, doing things to 'fit in'. Unrequited love, unobtainable love, unsatisfying relationships, fear of being left 'on the shelf' (e.g. in *Spinach and Eggs*), as well as internalised homophobia and confidence (e.g. in *Reclaiming My Voice*).[1]



Still from Let Rip – A Personal History of Seeing and Not Seeing

The Fountain Street Gallery shows a wide variety of work including straightforwardly saleable paintings and sculptures which isn't an obvious fit with poetry film. I'm excited that a gallery like this is showing your work. How did the show come about?

The gallery has been really supportive of my work since 2021 when they selected one of my works, *On Your Marks (Tension Lines)* (2020), a silent short film for their Sidewalk Video Gallery programme and then earlier this year included my poetry film *Let Rip: The Beautiful Game* in a group show, *Beyond Words* curated by Gabriel Sosa, an exhibition of works by artists who use language.

My formal training background is actually in Fine Art Painting. Prior to receiving my doctorate in 2016 from Loughborough University, I trained in Fine Art Painting at Winchester School of Art (1996-2000) where I earned my B.A and Slade School of Fine Art (2005-2007) where I received my M.F.A. Whilst I've really enjoyed showing my poetry films in cinemas and alternative spaces, it feels great to be showing the work in the context of the white cube too. I actually think my poetry films are like moving paintings, filmic paintings that reveal themselves over time. When I used to make painting back in the 1990s/2000s and in fact any 'static' 2D image that I produced then and now, I've always been interested in ideas around time and duration within a static image and ideas and thoughts being 'revealed' over time, in acts of looking and duration involved in looking at supposedly 'flat' static surfaces whose form and content reveal themselves over time. Time, in relation to the (2D, static) works in my career portfolio underline that time can be understood beyond that of a durational work e.g. in film and moving image work, as time can also be considered as being an aggregate of thought.

Looking at the kind of work that Fountain Street supports, including that of its director Marie Craig, what struck me was how many of the artists play with surface tension in their work. Regardless of whether the work is time based or not (in the traditional sense), many of the artists create within their chosen art form, at times, fleshy layers seeping underneath and revealing themselves only to be interrupted by other sets of imagery or text coming through which brings layers of personal and collective memory and personal and collective history. Recalling Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning* Drawing (1953), in which he erases an artwork by Willem de Kooning, but traces of the lost de Kooning artwork are still evident, just under the surface. The past and the present combust on the same surface, so the viewer is unsure what is past and what is present; works on one level contain a haunting quality and a modernity whilst still being archival/referring to the past/employing retro aesthetics. The compositional elements of my poetry films speak to these ideas, too, and more I feel. Thinking my poetry film work would be a good 'fit' for the gallery, I approached Marie about showing the films as a collection at Fountain Street and she kindly agreed to! [2]

What do you think we (as poetry filmmakers) can do to get work accepted into galleries or contemporary art events?

Moving Image work is embraced within the context of the white cube as a relatively new player against the historical canon of painting and drawing. Checking out the opportunities section of videoclub's newsletter (www.videoclub.org.uk) can be useful. *Visions in the Nunnery* is an open call that happens every two years at the Nunnery gallery in Bow, London which I have been part of and highly recommend.

Your work shows in both poetry film festivals such as REELpoetry and a very wide variety of film, poetry and art festivals and events… Do you modify how you describe yourself and/or your work for different audiences in order to step into the contemporary art scene, the poetry scene or the poetry film scene?

Someone once told me that I occupy a space that is equivalent to a diamond in terms of my practice, with one arm of the diamond: poetry, and the other arms, comedy, performance and art. They did then make some generalisations, that in poetry, the brain does the theatricals and audiences don't need anything else (i.e., visuals), that in comedy people just want to laugh and in art, people just want emotional/profound experiences. I did think these were sweeping generalisations, but they did make me think how these different media/artistic forms influence what the audience take away from what I do. I like straddling across all these 'scenes'. I don't like being pigeonholed or me/my practice being taxonomized as that feels very reductive. You will know by watching several of my poetry films like *Spinach and Eggs* and *Bears with Bananas and Bubbles in Their Boxers*, which talk about how the gay male community likes to label me, that I have a real issue with identity labelling more widely. Inhabiting different scenes, poetry one night, comedy the other, indeed, I may change the emphasis a little for each 'scene' but without diluting what I do or running the risk of 'selling out'. Sure there are some events that I have attended that are less open to the experimental, interdisciplinary nature of what I do (they like poetry, comedy etc in the traditional sense of these terms). When I do find spaces/events/nights like these in London that I regularly attend—*Incite!* run by Forum +, New Poetry Shack run by Jack Shamash and The Word Zoo run by Teige Bigman Maddison—that embrace interdisciplinarity, then I've struck gold.

A night that I particularly enjoy is Paper Tiger Poetry that is held monthly at the Tea House Theatre in Vauxhall, London hosted by Jason Why. The night has been a brilliant support for me to showcase my poetry and develop my skills as a performance poet since I first performed there back in June 2021. Yes it's billed as a night for performance poets but there is also a fair share of poets like me including Tom McColl, Frankie Calvert, Redeeming Features, Keith Bray and many others who fuse everything from biting satire, anarchist punk, ventriloquism and visual art with comedy elements into their poetry performances. It's a creative melting pot where I've met poets who perform poetry, in the expanded form! And I also run my own night in South London called *POW! Play on Words* where I encourage artists to come together who, like me, play promiscuous across varied artistic forms, by me providing a space for poetry performance to occupy the same space as poetry film, experimental comedy. In fact, labels are pointless here, as what underpins everything that I programme is how artists embrace and play with language in subversive, surprising and unexpected ways.[3]

When did you come to poetry filmmaking? Did either the poetry or the filmmaking come first or did they naturally come together from the beginning?

The filmmaking came first. Bear in mind that I also have a long history of creating performance art which often included spoken word/verbal language elements but not what I would necessarily consider as being 'poetry' or 'performance poetry' for that matter, but that's open to interpretation! Many of the films that I created within the *Let Rip* series I referred to above actually begun life having written text placards embedded within them rather than me speaking poetry that I had written as a voiceover (I'll refer to this point again later in the interview). Artist Clunie Reid, when watching *Let Rip: A Personal History of Seeing and Not Seeing* (2019) in November 2020 commented that the written placards within this film needed to be spoken/performed/read aloud by me rather than written as I have a particular voice from a particular point in London's queer history. She suggested that my voice and my accent evidence my life so clearly – a specific voice that gives me a specific identity to a specific place. She said this at a time when London (where I live) and so many parts of the world were in lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic. I liked what she suggested but could not imagine the conditions at that particular time of me ever performing (physically) in public again.

It was a cold and dull Sunday in late November 2020. An advert for an online poetry mic called PoetryLGBT on Zoom popped up on my Facebook feed. I was caught by the graphics of the advert initially but then thought this would be a good chance to read out those written placards above as 'poetry', a context and a scene that I had not ventured into before. What's the worst that can happen I thought. If they all think what I read out aloud is sh*t then I'll just press 'exit' on my laptop. What have I got to lose! Little did I know that this Sunday afternoon online open mic, was going to change the direction of my practice forever.

I remember the experience well. The host Andreena Leeanne was so supportive and welcoming to everyone. I was enthused by her energy and passion for the poets performing. I listened to the poets including Barney Ashton-Bullock, Lantern Carrier, Emmanuel 'Manny' Carriere and Paul Frewer-Lepper perform before me and enjoyed their poems. I was so nervous when it was my turn. My legs trembling, my stomach was in gut wrench, I had performer's butterflies in the stomach feeling for the first time in a long whilst as this was the first moment I was performing live to an audience and sharing very personal details with an audience who I could not see on Zoom, which probably helped with my nerves. Their response to my performance however was incredible. They loved the comedy and humour in what I was saying, and could really relate to and empathise with the experiences that I shared. I had found a new platform for my work and was very excited about the possibilities.

Excavating text from my *Let Rip* films to create live spoken word poetry pieces, I then began regularly writing poetry about my identity as a gay, working class British man and read these aloud for the first time at regular LGBT-centred open-mics including PoetryLGBT that were all taking place online at the time because of lockdown restrictions. Sometimes doing three or four online open mics a week, with me performing from the spare bedroom in my flat, just to gain the audience's reaction and for me to try things out in this new context for my work. Growing in confidence, I started to incorporate props into my then performances including cassette tape recorders and hand-drawn pencil drawings of a dog called Rufus to add a visual element to what I was doing. Whilst it was a great experience to get audience feedback on my poetry, the language I was using and how what I was saying evoked certain images/pictures in the imagination of the audience, I began to think much more about the visual aspect of me performing. Me working in poetry film came around late 2021 when I combusted the practice of me generating live Zoom performances (which I refer to below) and my history of working within artist moving image practice together.

I love your use of lettering on screen in films such as 'The Tale of Benny Harris' and 'Cottage (Perusing the flower bed)'. Can you tell me something about your ideas or your process around your lettering? I'm guessing you're using your own hand lettering?

Thanks, I like the brutal simplicity that I feel I have achieved with the felt tippery effect of the writing that appears graffitied over the screen in these films and also in *Head Boy, Covert Operations* and *Reclaiming my Voice.* As I said above, the earlier versions of the *Let Rip* series of films contained written placards rather than spoken word.

These placards were generated using the Titles option within iMovie (the software that I use to create all my films). The font that I used (Helvetica Neue), although giving a very clean and crisp finish to the lettering, also made these films feel and look very corporate and PowerPoint-y in their appearance. Some viewers of these films liked the tension that this created. On the one hand, the films are a personal exploration for me to discover what I can do to the image in an affective way. Me creating almost fleshy, visceral layers to images appearing on screen, with each film recycling my personal archive as an artist into the present, and by doing so, building up a sophisticated linguistic system of collaging images from my personal archive of artworks, mixed in with found ephemera and moving image footage (for example football matches in 1990s on YouTube). There was a real sensitivity about the [content of] the writing and imagery.

But then on the other hand, as my friend artist Harun Morrison commented upon about this aspect of the work when I spoke to him in December 2020, there was no sense that the typography I was using was grounded in the work at all, and that the PowerPoint feel and look in these films inevitably evokes managerial and administrative culture which, as he reminded me, are some of the most oppressive forces in the world. Harun said he found that when watching these earlier versions of these films, he was constantly distracted by why I was using this PowerPoint style-format, because I am talking personally about escaping certain kinds of restraint and personal acts of emancipation (e.g. emancipating myself from 1990s homophobic Britain). He suggested that as soon as I started to make things look and feel like PowerPoint or display the text in the way that I have done in these films, I am putting my thoughts on a track which is why it's such an oppressive piece of software. He suggested that I think then at that time more about the typography within what I was doing as another space to put accents on the texts especially since the work is so much about zine culture and other kinds of material that I was seeing. He recommended that I then work with a graphic designer to think through how that text operates, especially in reference to different materials and that maybe I employ a singular font all the way through my films that could be handwritten or speak to different sources that I talk about in the films. For example *Playgirl* (which I refer to in one of the films) has its own distinct font and so does *Television X.* I could use different fonts evoked by the references, even employing the handwritten, which whilst making things feel makes it very diaristic can also depend on one's handwriting.

All great suggestions from Harun, but then I remembered the font that I had designed myself when I was doing my MFA at the Slade fifteen years prior, which I called See Me. See Me is a font that looks like old computer writing from the 1980s/1990s. I used this font as part of a new film that I was making at the time, *SEE ME: A Walk through London's Gay Soho in 1994 and 2020,* and it really got me thinking about how I could design another font which spoke of the personal within my films and not appear deadening or just sitting on the surface without making much/any connection to the imagery and sounds around it. I was concerned about using my own handwriting as I didn't want the work to look diaristic in the way that artists can often use their handwriting and then the work looks overly confessional to the point of being self-indulgent.

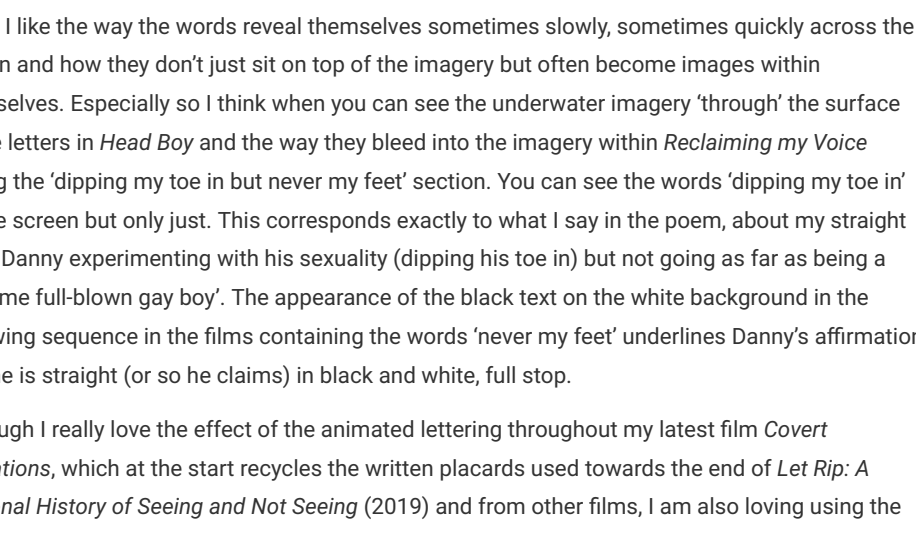
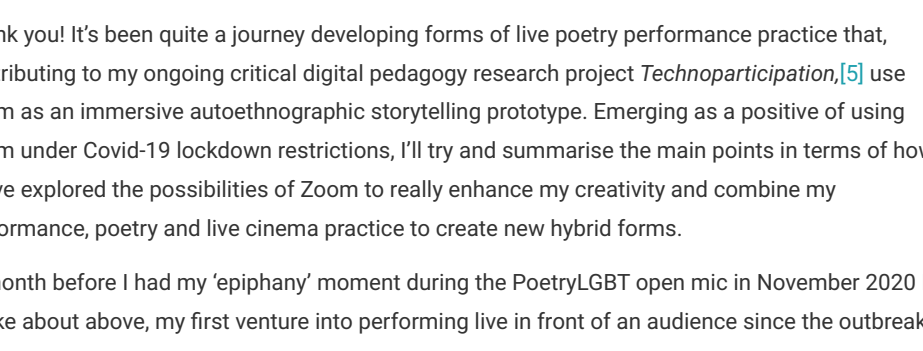


Photo of poetry performance of The Tale of Benny Harris, BOLD Queer Poetry Soiree, London June 2022

The lettering that appears in these newer films, like, as you mention, *The Tale of Benny Harris and Cottage,* is generated by me screen-recording myself creating words using the pen/pencil drawing option within Notes on my iPad, and then using the recording as a green-screen layer within the films. I like the way the words reveal themselves sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly across the screen and how they don't just sit on top of the imagery but often become images within themselves. Especially so I think when you can see the underwater imagery 'through' the surface of the letters in *Head Boy* and the way they bleed into the imagery within *Reclaiming my Voice* during the 'dipping my toe in but never my feet' section. You can see the words 'dipping my toe in' on the screen but only just. This corresponds exactly to what I say in the poem, about my straight mate Danny experimenting with his sexuality (dipping his toe in) but not going as far as being a 'full time full-blown gay boy'. The appearance of the black text on the white background in the following sequence in the films containing the words 'never my feet' underlines Danny's affirmation that he is straight (or so he claims) in black and white, full stop.

Although I really love the effect of the animated lettering throughout my latest film *Covert Operations*, which at the start recycles the written placards used towards the end of *Let Rip: A Personal History of Seeing and Not Seeing* (2019) and from other films, I am also loving using the iPad drawing recordings to compose imagery so as not to overdo it with the lettering. I really enjoyed creating the drawings of the moustache, the well-spoken but very attractive posh boy I worked with in McDonalds aka Grammar School Guy being embossed on screen, Gavin aka Black Eyeliner Boy, and Mike with his chest hair poking out of the top of his Nirvana t-shirt that all feature as hand-drawn animations at the start of *Covert Operations*.[4]

Your live Zoom performance 'Clever at seeing, without being seen' is just incredible. For many people just getting used to speaking to someone on Zoom has given them the heebie-jeebies. How much did you experiment to get your set-up to do what you wanted?

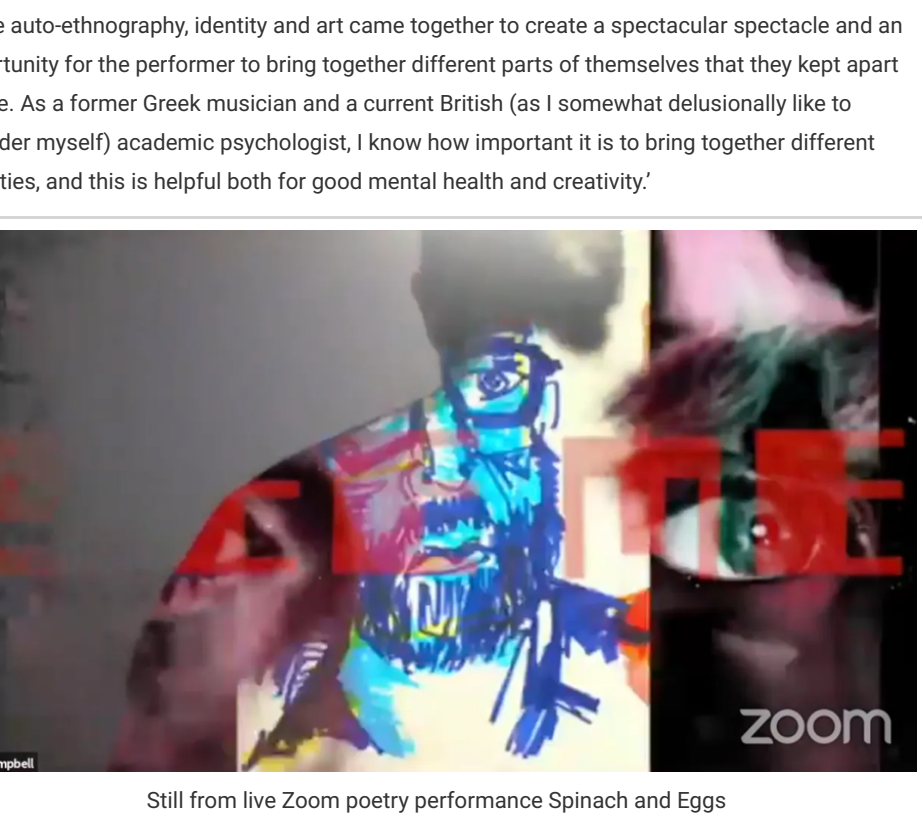


Thank you! It's been quite a journey developing forms of live poetry performance practice that, contributing to my ongoing critical digital pedagogy research project *Technoparticipation*,[5] use Zoom as an immersive autoethnographic storytelling prototype. Emerging as a positive of using Zoom under Covid-19 lockdown restrictions, I'll try and summarise the main points in terms of how I have explored the possibilities of Zoom to really enhance my creativity and combine my performance, poetry and live cinema practice to create new hybrid forms.

A month before I had my 'epiphany' moment during the PoetryLGBT open mic in November 2020 I spoke about above, my first venture into performing live in front of an audience since the outbreak started was at a time when the U.K was under Covid-19 lockdown restrictions — 'our bodies and minds were restricted but our creativity was not. Everyone was in the same predicament'[6] . I was invited to create an online solo performance to be performed via Zoom as part of activity I was engaged with at the time, as part of Conditions artist studio programme. When thinking about the set design for the performance, when experimenting with the green screen effect on Zoom, rather than using one of the pre-defined video backdrops made available by Zoom, I then made a new piece of moving image work to be used purely for the purposes of Zoom green effect. Having just discovered the green screen video option on Zoom only a couple of hours before the performance and with no rehearsal time available before the performance entitled *Polari Puppet*,[7] my innovative usage of Zoom's green screen during the performance had an incredible reception with viewers commenting that they had never experienced anything quite as immersive ever before on Zoom. With *Polari Puppet*, I really wanted to push Zoom's visual aesthetics as a means to frame, act as a visual container and play with different levels of order and chaos through the visual confinement achieved.

As a result of the success of me creating the personalised Zoom backdrop with *Polari Puppet* and the success of my film work being screened internationally (remembering that these films were not *poetry films* at that point), I then wondered what would happen if I combined the two and (with a bit of tweaking) repurposed the short films that I had made as green screen Zoom backdrops to explore what it may mean to remediate, excavate and bring back to life past artworks through the medium of moving image in the films that I was making, and then remediate and re-plug those films, those remediations, through the medium of live performance via Zoom to generate multi-layered multimedia sociocreative live poetry performances that are colourful, immersive, textured, organic and disorienting montages of young queer experience told through my own personal autobiography.

Over the course of 2021, I created numerous poetry performances online, using the past films as video backdrops for my poetry, complexifying each online performance with each new iteration performed. When interviewed by Matt Skallerud in April 2021, Andreena Leeanne of PoetryLGBT remarked, 'I love how Lee fuses the poetry with the filmmaking, really creative and everyone appreciates him when he comes to PoetryLGBT, he brings something different, he's been able to use Zoom to enhance his creativity and that's been amazing to see'. In his May 2021 review of *Spoken Sessions*, an online poetry reading event by Write Out Loud, Greg Freeman wrote, 'I tuned in on Thursday night to watch open mic performers Francis Golm, Pip McDonald, Lee Campbell, and Jaden Morton make full use of their opportunity, often employing the extra potential of online visuals to great effect – especially in Lee Campbell's case. He was able to show us what we missed when a glitch prevented us from seeing the full range of his experimental and innovative visuals at the Write Out Loud fundraising night in January'. In a more recent review of my headline set for *Creative HE Open Mic* (June 2022), Dr Aspa Paltoglou wrote, 'I loved the final performance where auto-ethnography, identity and art came together to create a spectacular spectacle and an opportunity for the performer to bring together different parts of themselves that they kept apart before. As a former Greek musician and a current British (as I somewhat delusionally like to consider myself) academic psychologist, I know how important it is to bring together different identities, and this is helpful both for good mental health and creativity.'



Still from live Zoom poetry performance Spinach and Eggs

By summer 2021, with many Zoom performances under my belt, I then fused many of my short online poetry performances together into one longer performance (each one not lasting any more than five minutes as that's the standard timeslot for an open-mic), to create longer performances including *Clever at Seeing without being Seen* and *Peer.*[8] These performances, as a form of expanded live cinema, pull together several poems/several performances that existed as individual scenes to create a bigger narrative. This new duration is important (beyond the initial early iterations at under five minutes). Through a lengthier duration, the viewer is shown the complexity of the layers, what's in them and how they interact, and they are being shown that again and again and again, and it's never the same.

These performances have since been included in prestigious festivals and events including *Disturbance#2,* Ugly Duck, London, *Festival ECRÃ Edition 5*, Rio de Janeiro, the *Immersive Storytelling* Symposium, Lakeside Arts Centre, Nottingham, and *Rise Up! Reconnect, Rebuild, Recreate 10th International Digital Storytelling Conference,* Loughborough University.

Co-curator of *Festival ECRÃ* Ana Albuquerque remarked:

> Lee Campbell's *Clever at Seeing without being Seen* and Dina Kelberman's *The Fan May Not Be Changed, You Just Don't Know The Future* turn platforms like Zoom and Teams into stages where the curtain never falls. Artifices once used for the furtherance of neoliberal productivity slavery become spaces of creative potential in the hand of our artists. The possibilities are endless. The performances in this edition prove that the exploration of the body, space and canvas does not cease with physical distance, and prove that the pandemic is more a challenging environment than a scenario of infertility.

Whilst audiences may or may not pick up on all the many references here (related to my personal experience of discovering my identity, internalised homophobia, etc.), I intended that they would, at base level, have a sensory/elusive view of the work, as one viewer described on seeing *Clever* on Zoom in June 2021, 'a block of amazing visual and auditory input'. Often in my performances, as is the case throughout the entire duration of *Polari Puppet,* I perform with my back to the audience where my back operates like a screen/projection surface, exploiting the fragmented-ness and inaccessible feeling of turning your back to the audience. A tape recorder acts as an extension of my body and offers another set of voices to that of mine performing and other voices heard elsewhere. Green screen effect employed with a constant repetitive video being played 'projected' onto my back gives the impression of text and imagery superimposed over my body, that I am wearing text/imagery like a garment, that of a body that has been layered with fragments of text/images/ history. Sounds that can be heard throughout the performance are textured, glitchy and uncomfortable deliberately to give a sense of layer.

The audience is never sure what is live, what is pre-recorded and what is playback of what has been recorded during the live performance. Pre-recorded sounds play in the background on iTunes shuffle which I react to there and then in the moment of liveness. Some viewers of the documentation of these performances have mentioned that they are completely unaware that they were watching documentation of a live performance. Some have suggested that the writing on my back is happening live too. One audience member commented that the live performance of *Polari Puppet* was the first time they had seen left-handed text being written.

The key underlying principles in early video art were the body and the performance object, and that was the thing that signified its liveness and differentiated it from the history of cinema /avant-garde film. *Polari Puppet as* a back projection performance comes from the history of video art (Vito Acconci, Valie Export, early Nam June Paik, Robert Morris' film *Mirror* etc.) where the camera becomes like a mirror or a viewer that can be controlled.

The video being live and able to feedback on itself is similar to my Zoom usage here. On the one hand, the work is like a flashback 45 years but now bought into the present due to the now unprecedented, familiar use of Zoom as a desktop communication tool because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Zoom attempts to put bodies in a room at times when you can't have bodies in a room. People have become much more familiar with it to a point of fatigue in terms of, amongst other things, how it promotes a disembodied embodiment. In this Zoom explosion, primary importance has been given to the face and the way that we are looking at each other now even to the naming of an app like Facetime (similar model to Zoom just different name) and not as Matthew Noel-Tod, when in conversation about this work, wittily remarked, called 'Backtime'.

The face is hugely significant in all this technology, so me turning my back is a simple yet powerful reversal of that. All we have now on Zoom is (usually) the face, shoulders, and chest, so turning the back to audience is erotic as I am giving the audience something that they do not usually see. A viewer once suggested that my turned back appears almost demonic. Whilst it could be said to turn one's back on an audience is a deliberate act to conceal oneself or block the audience, that's not what is happening here either. A friend commented upon seeing an iteration of the Zoom performance *Clever* that her favourite part was when I turn around to check if the audience are 'still there'. I like the fragmented-ness and the inaccessible feeling of turning your back to the audience BUT I also want to gauge their visible reaction so in latter performances using Zoom, I went half and half (half the time with my back turned to the audience and the other half, not). By turning my back to the audience at certain moments in a performance, I really made a statement, i.e. 'I don't want to see you and I don't want you to see me (my face)'.

I have come to enjoy the uncertainty, the danger of performing, not entirely in full control of how the green screen would operate throughout the duration of these live Zoom performances. The effect of the moving imagery appearing on my body and me achieving that sense of immersion for the viewer for the performance to 'work' is somewhat dependent upon how much light there is in the space/room that I am performing in, and whilst I had perfected the lighting level in the room I perform (my spare bedroom reconfigured as a space for me to perform in and for my partner to create paintings in during the pandemic lockdowns) to achieve the 'optimum' effect, I can never fully control it so it 'works' every time.

However, this serendipity, this state of being in a 'radical not-knowing' was really important to me at the time. Sometimes, I could only achieve half the screen space/viewing area/my body 'catching' the green screen imagery. In reality, this imagery that appeared not 'projected' on my body' was the green screen trying to operate on what was behind me/what I stood in front of: a white emulsion painted wall in the bedroom. With a lot of practice, I carefully manipulated the light in the room (using cardboard to black out the skylight window and placing my laptop which I used for the performance at a very specific position under an artificial ceiling light). Despite all my efforts, sometimes the effect just did not 'work', but I learnt to accept that and indeed capitalise upon it, which I shall refer to later. As much as I enjoyed making the short films around the same time, everything within them was neatly ordered into a timeline and I could pretty much control everything (although I could never fully control the green screen layering effect which I loved), so having this aspect of real uncertainty to what I was doing with Zoom was strangely appealing at the time.

The Zoom performances have taught me a lot about some of the complexities surrounding polycontextuality—being in more than one space at the same time. In terms of the somewhat, at times, awkward spatial dynamic I set up to create my Zoom performances where my body and the space that I am performing 'in' is liminal; neither entirely physical nor wholly virtual/online. But there is another awkwardness at play here in what I have identified as an interesting relationship between what I am saying in my poetry, the slippages of the sonic, bits where I am typing/turning on technology etc., and resonances that are happening at home. The spare room that I use to make these performances backs onto the lounge area of my flat and directly behind the (thin) wall, which I refer to above, that I stand in front of whilst speaking/performing is a sofa which Alex, my partner, often sits on whilst I am performing my poetry, sometimes speaking very loudly, in the room adjacent. How much can Alex really hear behind the wall I wonder? A lot of the time I share really personal details (and some quite intimate about me and Alex's relationship) which I have never shared with anyone else before. Alex claims he can't hear what I am saying but I reckon he must catch certain things. And rather than seeing this as a problem, I've come to embrace this and remind myself of my love of the serendipitous nature of working with liveness, of me being the *poet-performer-autoethnographer* harnessing live Zoom performance as a space of *radical not knowing* and its disruptive potential, I have learnt that I cannot replicate in any way possible the visual effects I can on anything else *but on Zoom.* Beyond post Covid-10 lockdown restrictions as we head out of a 'Zoom world' and into physical/hybridised spaces, I am well aware that my usage of Zoom is more than a convenient (and for a long time only) form to show/make work, but Zoom entirely underpins the aesthetics within what I do, and for me to accept and embrace that I may not be fully in control of exactly what the audience sees/being able to replicate the visual/audio appearance of the Zoom green screen for the audience when live.

As part of the *Immersive Storytelling* Symposium, Lakeside Arts Centre, Nottingham in Autumn 2021, I was invited to create a live Zoom performance at the venue in physical space. I must admit I hesitated at first as, at the time, I was nervous about what I thought I needed to make the performance 'work' (I had not come to accept at that point that the effect 'not working' can also be intrinsically *part* of the work). Would I be able to achieve the lighting levels required, maintain a certain distance between me and the laptop screen and a white wall behind me 'catching' the green screen, would I be able to stand in a certain way for imagery to appear to be projected on me? But then I asked myself, 'Does this work only exist in my spare room, in the bedroom at the back of 96a Devonshire Road, Southeast London and *nowhere else* because that's where I control things to my "desired effect"'? I recalled a remark that Graham Barton, who I work alongside at University of the Arts London, made as part of the successful Digital Pedagogies Open Studio project I initiated last year with Natasha Sabatini and Richard Parry. In speaking about how the move to teaching and learning online was a form of disruption when Covid-19 lockdown first hit in 2020, Graham suggested that now in respect to moving back into the physical world from the digital/virtual, 'The disruption is in the return'. But there was also something potentially very liberating about me *not being* in the bedroom at the back of 96a Devonshire Road, Southeast London – Alex won't be there, and so I could potentially say what I like throughout my performance without fear of upsetting him (but why would I want to upset him anyway).[9]

With the encouragement of Alex, I took the plunge and headed to Nottingham. It was a wonderful experience in terms of performing the work elsewhere and the audience/performer spatial dynamics that were set up. Whilst I performed live via Zoom in one room of the venue, another audience watched online and another audience watched physically, watching me perform on a livestream projected on a large screen in the theatre space, only a few steps away from the room where I was performing. Upon seeing documentation of my performance, I had only achieved the green screen superimposition on my body and not in the background, but I didn't care; the *content* of the performance, *Clever at Seeing without being Seen,* is all about the difficulties gay people experience in terms of seeing, looking, being seen etc so in this way what I did underlines *form is content*.[10]

Have there been any unexpected results?

My Zoom performances have opened up unexpected ways of me being able to explore and discover new ways of seeing (both pedagogically and artistically) through the Internet as a very specific and nuanced kind of viewing platform, and how these may in fact correspond with ideas of (in)visibility experienced by the LGBT community.

To explain, as a practical embodiment of what I refer to as *techno-empathy,* in December 2021 I invited members of the University of the Arts London (UAL) LGBTQ+ student network to attend a presentation of my Zoom performance *Clever at Seeing without being Seen* which nails a specific talent queer people need to acquire – the title. The performance was as an iteration of the Digital Pedagogies Open Studio mentioned above. Having watched the performance, audience members feedback how they could feel empathetic to so many of the personal experiences that I shared throughout the performance, as they had encountered similar experiences themselves. The performance generated a space of empathy to break down hierarchies between student and tutor in two ways. First, in terms of me and the students as mutual practitioners by me demonstrating how to combine physical and virtual forms in terms of my usage of physical props during the performance that bring to life certain parts of the poetry, including cassette tape recorders from the 1990s and photocopies of a large scrapbook I made as a teenager between 1993-1998, and secondly, in terms of the autobiographic content of the poetry that I shared throughout the performance. During the post-performance feedback discussion, students said they appreciated the level of honesty that I shared with them in terms of revealing, at times, quite difficult personal subject matter but subject that they themselves could relate to.

Still from live Zoom poetry performance Clever at Seeing without being Seen

Attending numerous online events since lockdown in March 2020 designed for the LGBT community to share their experiences using spoken word and poetry, including PoetryLGBT and *Incite!* run by Forum + and hosted by Hannah Chutzpah, paired with the move I went through in my teaching practice to online-only modes of teaching delivery, I noticed that a platform like Zoom, or Blackboard, can facilitate a person's social interaction, and sharing ideas/stories with others which may not have happened offline/IRL. These platforms can be an effective means of encouraging those who do not wish to be identified, are too nervous to ask a question or share an idea to participate in group discussion. Someone can often gain heightened confidence digitally as opposed to when they would sometimes have previously held back during activities in the physical world. In many ways, the confessional booth of chat windows on Zoom resembles a Freudian couch; when you are not necessarily making direct eye contact, you can actually share more in some ways**.** The virtual environment, to some extent, may hold us hostages but we are liberated – we have a freedom to imagine. By sharing our personal stories online in an anonymised, optically restricted manner, we may be able to begin to heal traumatic experiences.

Returning to the discussion referred to above with the UAL LGBTQ+ student network members, we went further in our evaluation of Zoom, and began to explore how the optics at work for both audience and performer/speaker when engaging in Zoom may be (re)considered in terms of potentially opening up ways of thinking about the content of these performances: queer (in)visibility. We began to think together how certain aesthetics afforded to the online digital environment may offer a way to (re)think about optics and how this investigation may also relate to issues of (in)visibility within the queer community.

The virtual encounter is a sort of crossed gaze in a way – you are looking but you are not being looked back [at]. Online parties cannot look at each other in the eye — this kind of direct visual encounter with another human is interrupted completely, in addition to the delay in reaction time (another resumption lag, albeit a technological one). We found a relation to how queer people see and are seen and identified a relationship between my specific usage of the form and aesthetics of Zoom (optical one-way street, interruptions, disruptions, interferences etc.) and queer storytelling in relation to ideas of (in)visibility. In tandem with Marshall McLuhan's 1964 provocation: 'the medium is the message', the students enjoyed thinking about how I employ the form and aesthetics of Zoom within my performance as a means to underline the content of what I share in my poetry; personal stories of the difficulties of being seen, not being seen etc.

How precise can you be between your live reading and what is happening with the images? Are you controlling the changes in film sequences – for example from football to Brighton – live as you speak, or can you time your performance perfectly to something that runs from beginning to end?

There will always a be a slight second lag between what is seen on screen and what is heard when the work is performed on Zoom. However, that quality is not seen as a negative in the context of these performances where the importance and clarity of hearing and understanding is deliberately obscured/ intentionally difficult to decipher; an intentional confusion to suggest that the audience may not understand what's going on. As I refer to above, the possibility of lagging and buffering, interferences, interruptions etc. create a texture that has resonances with some of the difficulties queer people can experience in being heard/seen and is a textural quality that I embrace in my poetry storytelling to underline a point. Especially so in terms of when I talk about queer people including myself discovering our sexuality at a young age in spaces/ places where being anything other than heterosexual is frowned upon/not accepted. Obstacles are often deliberately put in someone's path to coming out or feeling they are unable to express their (queer) sexuality directly/clearly or express it in any way at all. Whilst the green-screen background acts [as] a base, each live iteration containing so many levels of improvisation means that a performance/film screening can never be repeated twice. Containing so many visual and audio clashes and dizzying sound levels for texture and difference, the layering subsides in places and towards the end, and the taunts are heard more clearly. Whilst there are moments throughout the performances where I make everything super clear, then I go back out, one audience member commented that the discomfort weirdly enough made him feel like he was in the room with me and that the 'interruptions, craziness, and everything being so distorted visually made it better than it being smooth otherwise it would have felt like a slide show. I loved love the fact that it is not perfectly synchronised'. Extending these qualities when I perform the work now more often IRL, with the imagery on a screen / on a projection near me where I read my poems, I deliberately engineer a slight 'out-of-syncness'.

What do you feel are the differences for yourself as performer and/or for the audience between the live events married with film and the works that have been made as complete films?

I guess for me it has something to do with me performing my poems live and me being present in the moment with an audience, be that online or in the physical space. During the live performance, I often incorporate a sense of improvisation within the work to whatever degree I feel/ how I am triggered by a particular audience. At present this only extends to the poems that I am reading and not to the visual imagery. To explain, as I perform, I go 'off script'. I don't mind if the moving imagery is out of 'sync' with what I am reading as a result of me going off-script as that adds to the performance. It also shows to the audience that I am present with them and responding to the mood and feel of the room, much like what a stand-up comedian does. [11]

When I go off-script I often give the audience 'insider' details about something that I have just said in the poem. For example, when I performed my poem *Nice Cup of Tea* at *Gobjaw* the other week in London, I stopped reading towards the end, came out of my 'poetry-voice' and told the audience that after all those cups of tea I had been drinking mentioned in the poem, I really wanted to go the toilet (which I knew was what a lot of people in the audience were wondering!). But more provocatively than that, at other times, I self-interrupt my performances and say things that I would never be able to say to anyone at the time (my teenage years in the 1990s) that a lot of my poems are set in. I remember stopping during a reading of *Covert Operations* recently just after the line where I say 'Mr Suputo, my sexy Italian teacher for Geography Phwoar. My imagination in your class took me everywhere' to tell the audience exactly what I found attractive about said teacher; that I thought Mr Suputo had a great bum despite those rather baggy cream coloured chinos popular with men in the 1990s that he wore, and that I am convinced he clocked me having a peak at said behind which I think he quite enjoyed from the cheeky (no pun intended) smile he gave me. And don't start me off on what I once shared with the audience during a reading of *Covert* when I talk about secretly fancying Grammar School Guy 'through the flames of my griddle'!

Sure, there can be times during a film screening that I am present at with an audience that I can share these more intimate details *after* the screening but there's nothing like sharing those details live with an audience *as the poem unfolds.*

At present, as I am speaking out my poems aloud with the moving imagery behind me/to my side, the imagery will be set.[12] However, I am now exploring live ways to remix that imagery in future performances by adding another layer (a 'live' layer that could have more than one video feed) by using VJ software and live feeds. I love working within the field of moving image because of the levels of control that I can have and the (creative) restrictions of the confines of the iMovie timeline. Yet, this sharply contrasts with my prior performance work which often had an improvisatory nature and could be characterised as having a high degree of unexpected/chance elements. To explore this axis of working between control and the unexpected/unplanned/improvisatory initially, I'd like to gain knowledge and understanding of working with VJ software and live feeds where I import clips into VJ software so I have no control in terms of the running order those clips will appear during screenings of the films.

The situations above recall a conversation with University of Nottingham's Susannah Goh, after my aforementioned *Immersive Storytelling* Symposium performance above, where I was performing in one room and the audience sat watching me in a theatre on a giant screen. Susan expressed that there was almost magical quality about the different spatial dynamics at force during what I did. Paraphrasing her ideas, Susannah suggested that the moment that I walked out of the room where I had conducted the performance and into the theatre only feet away was 'as if by magic' I appear from my performance digital reality into another (real-world) reality, almost like a person on television stepping out of the TV set and into the living room (physical space). 'All of a sudden, you appeared!', Susannah mentioned with gusto. She then mentioned that one of the audience members watching my performance live in the theatre, the audience had witnessed, for her, what was a deeply personal raw experience through someone else's eyes. And then, as if by magic, that individual (me) appears as a (physical) person like me on television appearing/stepping out of the screen. Consequently, the audience had to relate to me in a completely different way. I entered the theatre to answer questions from the audience and break things down. Susannah appreciated this as the actor(s)/performer(s) being present to take questions, explain things etc. immediately after the performance in the same space as the audience is not what you (always) get in a theatre and therefore the audience superimpose what they think the performance was about.

I am also currently exploring incorporating a live performance element and generating a live cinematic experience where live performance 'interacts' with the films. For example, as the film *Let Rip: Personal History of Seeing* (2019) is being screened, all of a sudden, performers start coming in, re-enacting what is on screen creating a mirroring what's on screen so there is a liveness to proceedings. These performance interruptions echo moments in the films. Actual football players enter the space carrying McDonalds' bags and then pull out their jockstraps; a football player in a jockstrap winking at me, etc.

Artist Jeff Keen used ripping, cutting and burning in his films and also integrated drawing and performance. Like Jeff, I'd like to paint onto the (projection) screen then rip the screen as something is being projected and then rip the screen with another screen behind it. Or maybe that I use Zoom to do the interrupting? In other words, in the same manner as I have segued Zoom recordings into my poetry film, as I have done so with my 2022 poetry film version of *Let Rip: Teenage Scrapbook during* moments in my physical performances where ripping takes place, there are Zoom interruptions which the audience are not sure are recorded or taking place live.

In terms of developing my poetry film further, I am also planning to make a new film which has both the narrative arc of a football match and the same length: 90 minutes. This is to question: 1) How much of myself would I disclose in terms of the personal given that duration (90 mins)? and 2) How much time do you give yourself as a viewer to work that you know is difficult psychologically or emotionally or physically to engage with? Whilst still wishing to incorporate archival footage and employ the same green screen effect I currently use to achieve seductive layers seeping through to 'compel' the viewer, by creating new mantras/rituals, I want to explore repetition and the 'musicality' / the sound design of the film to compel and 'repel' the viewer. My film *Tackle* has a musicality, but its sonic complexity doesn't go far enough. *Let Rip: The Beautiful Game* only reveals limited personal details about me because of its short duration. Using sonic visual attacks associated with my love of the YouTube Poop phenomenon, I want to now produce a film so unlistenable but at the same time involves/seduces the listener/viewer.

You've said that the "performative filmic backdrop … involves me creating a bridge between

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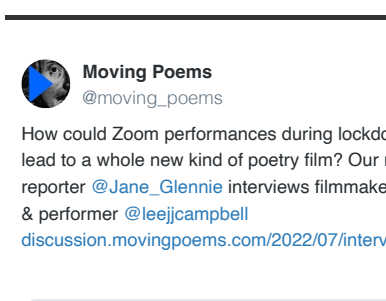

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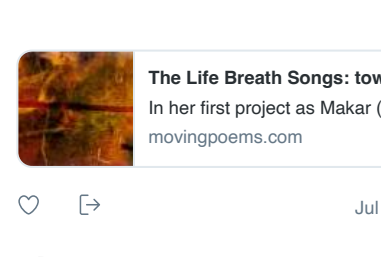

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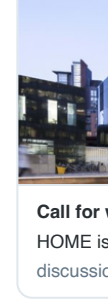

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video, poetry and performance and, in turn, proposing a new way of thinking about what the somewhat tired term 'collage' may be." I'm very interested in this idea of creating a bridge between communicative formats and your exploration of collaging and layering. For me that is developing between video, poetry and the page and a new way of thinking about graphic design. Does your work appear on the page? Is this an interpretation you've thought about?

I've had several of my poems published in journals and magazines including *The Atticus Review, Ink, Sweat and Tears, Powders Press, Otherwise, You Are Here – The Journal of Creative Geography* and *Queerlings – A Literary Magazine for Queer Writing* and where possible a link to the poetry film accompanying the respective poem is provided and/or artworks that I have made to accompany the poem. I haven't really thought too much beyond that at the moment but is definitely something I would like to work with in the future.

Particularly so as the 'static' printed page, for me, also represents a space which can be thought of in terms of time and duration if we recall comments that I made earlier about static things and objects revealing ideas and thoughts over time in just the same way as durational work e.g., in film and moving image work do in the more traditional sense of them being 'durational works'. In 2020, I made a 2D collage work using felt tips on paper, *Fag in your Face*. Its composition sets up a relationship to depth, surface and text where the writing interrupts the image thus setting up a dialogue between interiority, superficiality and surface and depth.[13] Cut lines and ripped lines combine with one text layer on another text layer. The writing is direct whereas the image is less direct. The writing over the image determines its meaning. There is an oscillation between something that is overwhelmingly simple but actually quite complex. It could be said that the writing interrupts that in many ways. The text seems quite blunt first off but not over time. As a collage drawing, different layers make the viewer explore idea around shininess, smoothness, texture and intimacy. The ripped pages have a grainy texture. On a sensorial level, it feels like there's' more depth to something; the shinier something is the more impenetrable it is in many ways, the less that it reveals about itself. The imperfectness of it not being perfectly smoothly stuck down gives it a depth. The repetition of the figure that is turned away from you. Aggregation of time is coming through in the sense that you can still feel the rip even if you can't see it or hear it. The gentle tears and violent rips of the collaged-together drawings that form *Fag* directly reference my moving image work, where ripping is used a device to both reveal and conceal.

Developing this work, I thought that maybe the writing and the faces in opposition with each other could be more explicit. I could decentre the text or rethink its placement, so the writing is a layer in itself beyond just being a vehicle for meaning / getting a message across like a protest placard. Maybe the writing could get more diffuse and indeterminate as to create a third meaning with the images rather than underlining the meaning of the work.

The ideas above about *Fag* could act as a starting point for how I start to work with the page more to present my poetry in a time durational manner in the ways I suggest. I like the ideas of the words to my poems written on the page in ways that make them illegible/hard to make out/indeterminate in places as to underline the content within a lot of my poems. Words that are folded into the texture of images. Certainly an interesting avenue to explore!

Bio:

Lee Campbell

Dr Lee Campbell is an artist, poet experimental filmmaker, writer, Senior Lecturer at University of the Arts London, curator of regular performance poetry night POW? Play on Words in South London and founder of Homo Humour, the first of its kind project on contemporary queer male film and moving image practices that explore humour and LGBTQ+ storytelling. His experimental performance poetry films have been selected for many international film festivals since 2019 including Queerbee LGBT Film Festival, The Gilbert Baker Film Festival, Kansas 2020 and 2021, HOMOGRAPHY, Brussels and STATES OF DESIRE: Tom of Finland in the Queer Imagination, Casa de Duende, Philadelphia, USA, 2020 WICKED QUEER 2021, Boston, USA, FilmPride – Brighton & Hove Pride's official LGBTQ+ film festival, Brighton, UK, Splice Film Festival 2021, Brooklyn, USA and Darkroom Festival, London.

Notes:

[1] You can read more about my usage of the rip in these films here in this reflective account I wrote this year for Moving Image Artists Journal https://movingimageartists.co.uk/2022/03/25/let-rip/ You can view all of these films mentioned in this paragraph here: https://filmfreeway.com/LeeCampbell

[2] Details of *On Your Marks (Tension Lines)* (2020) as part of Sidewalk Video Gallery programme can be found here: https://www.fsfaboston.com/the-sidewalk-video-gallery/campbell-milosevic

[3] You can find documentation of past *POW! Play on Words* events here: https://leecampbellartist.blogspot.com/p/curatorial-lee-campbell-projects.html

[4] Compare the text on screen in *Let Rip: A Personal History of Seeing and Not Seeing* (2019) https://filmfreeway.com/LETRIP with the hand drawn text animations at the start of *Covert Operations* (2022) https://filmfreeway.com/COVERTOPERATIONS

[5] Details of this project can be found here: https://leecampbelltechnoparticipation.blogspot.com

[6] These comments were made by Esther Moreno Morillas during her presentation 'Porn Festivals During COVID-19, An Online Approach', at Moving Image, Popular Media and Culture Research Seminar on Wednesday 9th March 2022.

[7] You can view details and watch a recording of this performance online here: https://filmfreeway.com/POLARIPUPPET2020

[8] You can view details and watch a recording of these performances online here: https://filmfreeway.com/CLEVERATSEEINGWITHOUTBEINGSEEN2021 and https://filmfreeway.com/PEERLIVEZOOMPERFORMANCE

A live Zoom performance of Peer is taking place on 17th July as part of Festival ECRA: Details here: https://www.festivalecra.com.br/6fecraperformances-1/par

[9] You can read about The Digital Pedagogies Open Studio I co-set up at University of the Arts London in 'Technoparticipation' article I wrote, recently published in *Performance Research* journal issue 'On Interruptions':

[10] To see documentation of the performance and the spatial set up I mention here, visit: https://leecampbelltechnoparticipation.blogspot.com/2021/11/clever-at-seeing-without-being-seen.html

[11] For an example of this, see when I performed my poem *Rufus* last year at Monkey Business Comedy Club in Camden: https://youtu.be/EGfvcbTLJTQ

[12] For examples of this, see when I performed at *Bold Queer Poetry Soirée,* Above the Stag Theatre, London in June 2022 https://youtu.be/UrQlOEZH7do and at *Runt of the Litter* in London, May 2022 https://youtu.be/n5iXKBQQMeU

[13] This work was made as part of *The Daily Winds Map of Brighton* https://brightoncca.art/event/the-daily-winds-map-of-brighton/

Hover over the area around George Street on the map and *Fag in my Face* will appear with accompanying description.

Jane Glennie

Website

Jane Glennie's poetry films have screened at festivals across the world. Her work has a layered visual aesthetic that is abstract, painterly and floods the imagination. Films have featured on www.shondaland.com and have received distinctions and awards internationally. She is also a typographer and book designer, founder of Peculiarity Press publishing artists' books.

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