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How 'Day for Night' Artist Jim Campbell Reflected S.F. Back Onto Itself

Ian A. Stewart | Photo: Connie Zhou | June 21, 2018

For better and for worse.



SLIDESHOW
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High on a ledge inside Jim Campbell's Dogpatch studio sit three scale models of the hollowed-out apex of Salesforce Tower. The smallest, at eight inches tall, approximates what the top of the tower looks like from a little over two miles away—say, from the top of Alamo Square. The second, at 16 inches tall, is what it looks like a little closer in, from the Exploratorium. And the tallest, 30 inches, represents the view of the tower from within 3,000 feet (i.e., Red's Java House). "The danger zone," Campbell jokes—where you're looking up 30 degrees and start smashing into things.

Suffice it to say, Salesforce Tower—and the massive LED art installation by Campbell, *Day for Night*, that crowns it—is visible to just about every person in San Francisco, plus hundreds of thousands more in the East Bay, in the North Bay, and on the Peninsula. (It can reportedly be seen from 20 miles out.) Bay Areas may have different vantage points on Campbell's work or see it at different scales, but when they look up, they all have the same image—be it dancers, pedestrians on the Embarcadero, motorists downtown, or waves on the bay—projected out at them.

How they'll perceive this image, though, is an open question. Is *Day for Night*, as Salesforce CEO Marc Benioff suggests, a unifying symbol, a beacon binding all of us together? Is it the ultimate totem to the techie wealth that has propelled San Francisco into the upper echelon of global cities? Is it a paean to humanistic politics, a flashy-as-hell fulfillment of the government mandate that developments set aside 1 percent of building costs for public artwork? Or is it an all-seeing eye in the sky, projecting our movements out like a surveillance-state eye of Sauron?

The answer, it seems, is all of the above. "It's a reflection of what kind of day we've had," says Todd Hosfelt, Campbell's gallerist. "It's about us." It's also a reflection of our constantly changing relationship with this beautiful, inspiring, maddening city.

Technically speaking, of course, *Day for Night* is none of that. Rather, it's a collection of 11,000 LED bulbs attached to small flexible arms that protrude from the top six stories of the building, pointed back at the building's perforated aluminum facade. A series of moving images are projected through the LEDs onto the building as pixels. Meanwhile, a series of cameras stationed around the city—atop the Cliff House, inside Golden Gate Park, at the Ferry Building—also feed video into the system, with Campbell and his team capturing, editing, and later that night projecting the footage onto the building. The end result is, essentially, a video diary of a day in the life of San Francisco.

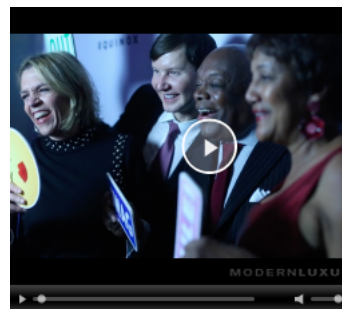
Is it intrusive? Disquieting? Challenging? Sure is, says Dorka Keehn, who served as an art consultant to the building's principal developer, Boston Properties, and who previously played an integral role in Leo Villareal's Bay Lights installation. "[Public art] shouldn't be dumbed down to the lowest common

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denominator," she says. "If it's just vanilla, what's the point?" Gallery owner Wendi Norris, who cocurated the project with Keehn, agrees. "It reflects the pulse of the city, which is a successful vision of public art in the first place." Notably, for a light project of its scale, *Day for Night* does not cast the harsh glare of the neon signs of Tokyo or New York. Because of the way the light bounces off the building's surface, the images reflect back as soft, hazy, even warm. Indeed, Campbell spent time in Hong Kong just before submitting his proposal, an experience that reiterated to him how lightly he needed to tread upon his hometown's skyline. "It's a glance work," he says. "You see the skyline as part of the background—as ambient—and this needs to feel like part of that."

But he and, more broadly speaking, Salesforce Tower *are* ultimately redrawing our skyline in ways that are not universally popular. Despite our reputation for tolerance and bohemianism, San Franciscans can be a prickly bunch when it comes to civic aesthetics. The Transamerica Pyramid, Sutro Tower: All were loathed when they first appeared on the scene. (Hell, even the Golden Gate Bridge had its detractors.) The fact is, our skyline has never been static, and this horizon-blocking tower won't be the last. Within three years, two new skyscrapers will go up around Salesforce Tower, and it will no longer be alone, standing like a gherkin-shaped sentinel over the city. "There's something unique about having a single kind of focal point, which is a lot of power with regard to the work and a lot of responsibility," Campbell says, "and I'm taking both of those very seriously." Or as Keehn says a little more bluntly, "At least it's not a giant arch, for Christ's sake."

Which is to say, *Day for Night* is here to stay. Unless, that is, Campbell can replicate the happy accident he stumbled upon during an early test run. Trying out different colors on the building, he piped in a soft magenta image, not quite a solid block of color, textured in places. It was almost the very same color as the evening sky. With a little bit of tweaking, Campbell speculated, he could probably make the top of the tower camouflage into the surrounding dusk. In essence, the artist could do what the building's sharpest critics cannot: make it disappear completely.

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