



## NYFA.ORG NEWS

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### Where the Façades Are Façades

Beth Campbell

*Within the sea of Manhattan eye candy, the Financial District is something of a bore. At street level, anyway, the heart of the world's sport of moneymaking is a dull collage of chain stores, oppressive corporate lobbies, unnamed multifunctional shops, and vacant storefronts, with the shadow of 9/11 looming over all of it.*

*For her current Public Art Fund project, Brooklyn-based artist Beth Campbell created a piece of public art disguised as a local storefront—or storefronts. Potential Store Fronts is a truly disorienting mise en abyme, where a series of successive façades moving back into the space appear to be reflections. In actuality, they are Campbell's meticulous recreations, right down to the cracks and stains. NYFA Current asked Campbell to write about the making of Potential Store Fronts and about how her previous work has culminated in the project.*



Beth Campbell

*Potential Store Fronts (2007)*

Mixed media installation at 125 Maiden Lane, New York

Courtesy the artist and Public Art Fund (Photo: Seong Kwon)

My current public art project *Potential Store Fronts* is the culmination of a series of steps taken over the last few years. In 2004, I was in the process of developing a new piece for Art Basel Miami Beach. Initially I was looking to make a new video piece that would be something like a video within a video or a piece of analog feedback. I would play a video in a monitor, re-shoot it incorporating the space around the monitor, and then play the second generation in a different monitor, repeating this process a number of times. I was interested in the traces of the different spaces surrounding the frames of the monitors. Before the video was even begun, I had played with the process using photography. I quickly learned that what I was most interested in was presence of the physical spaces between the frames. At that point it seemed that sculpture or installation would be the better fit.

This abandoned idea is what led to my “bathroom piece,” *Never Ending Continuity Error*. Four seemingly identical bathroom units consisting of a wall, floor, and sink with a set of objects (toothbrush, soap, dishcloth, etc.) were built in a row. Above each sink was what appeared to be a mirror; in reality it was a hole in the wall framed like a mirror. The viewer then looked through what initially seemed to be reflection, but materialized into multidimensional space. Beyond the four sections of bathroom was an actual mirror that offered up a reflection, distancing and removing the viewer. On completion, I was particularly interested in the idea that the “work” of the artwork was actually happening in a space that contained nothing, a frame of nothing. The bathroom scenario and its parts functioned as a support apparatus for the view through. I left the piece freestanding and allowed the work to reveal itself as a non-illusion. The side view offered a sense of time or cadence, illuminating the various arrangements of the objects around the sink. These changes helped destabilize the reading as simply “reflection” and captured the moments like frames in a film strip.

A few years later, I was invited to propose a window design for Bergdorf Goodman as part of a fundraiser in collaboration with the New Museum. I was interested in playing with the recession and depth of the bathroom piece, but the Bergdorf windows were only four feet shallow. So I concentrated on the side view and used repeating identical thresholds or doorways. When it came time to make proposals for the Public Art Fund's *In the Public Realm* program, I had the structural idea of the store in my head, but kept it quiet for a while. It seemed so obvious to me as a next step, as if everyone would see it coming. I was a little intimidated and excited by the idea.



Beth Campbell  
*Never Ending Continuity Error* (2004)  
Mixed media installation

Although derived from the bathroom piece, the storefront plays differently upon the viewer. With the bathroom, the view into the next section was through a frame. In *Potential Store Fronts*, the whole façade—the entire store—is viewed through. An infinity mirror is an appropriate reference, but the piece actually functions more like a feedback loop or *mise en abyme* (an image inside an image), although a visceral and physical one.

In order to duplicate the façade, I had to become completely familiar with every detail. I took endless photographs and measured every surface again and again. A three-dimensional computer model was built in CAD (Computer Aided Drafting) to determine the placement of four false façades in the interior. The measurements were so important because everything was built off-site and would only be assembled in the space; once assembled it would be impossible to move them. Different parts came from different locations; the Plexiglas, the neon, and the structure of the window all had to come together. The base and framework for the windows were built of plywood and MDF and then covered with the appropriate faux surfaces to imitate the various metals and granite. Because of the cost of materials such as stainless steel, I had to be inventive with duplication. Also, there was a small problem in that the ceiling in the space dropped down two and a half inches about seven feet into the store. So, the four interior façades are 97% smaller than the original. I felt it was incredibly important to maintain the ratio of the rectangles and lighting to carry out the effect of total duplicity.

As the piece became more complete there began to be much interaction with passers-by. While *Never Ending Continuity Error* was installed in a gallery, *Potential Store Fronts* lives within the boundaries of the street or the everyday. It pries open a space into the surface of what is expected or anticipated. That's why the note on the door reading "Back in 5" speaks directly to the viewer—as if an attendant were really there—but falls into the abyss of repetition. The aim of a storefront is to beckon or seduce; I enjoy the play with a store that is fixed in its own offer, consuming itself.



Beth Campbell  
*Potential Store Fronts* (2007)  
Mixed media installation at 125 Maiden Lane, New York  
Courtesy the artist and Public Art Fund (Photo: Seong Kwon)

It is the play with something seemingly familiar that drives this piece; how it plays upon the expectations of the viewer, blowing them apart with depth, creating uncertainty and second-guessing. It undermines a viewer's sense of perception and awareness and calls into question one's perspective or point of view. Ultimately, the destabilization of the viewer's sense of the familiar is integral to this piece. I hope it arouses a spectrum of responses from accepted to confused to delighted as the experience plays out.

The piece has such a different life between the various stages of the day and into the night. At different points of the day, the multiple reflections in the Plexiglas repeat all the movement on the street, creating a multi-faceted world or line of possible worlds. At night, the neon takes over, beaming crisply. *Potential Store Fronts* is the largest piece I have ever done, and in the shortest amount of time. I think I only saw the store five weeks before the opening. Thankfully, the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council generously loaned one of their Swing Spaces for the project. I anticipated that the store would have some sort of residual demarcation from its previous life; actually, the space at 125 Maiden Lane was empty and the façade was blank except for a big dent above the doorway. So I developed two seemingly contradictory objectives: to learn and replicate every detail of the façade and also to create some sort of content or "fiction" for the store, drawing influence from my Brooklyn neighborhood, Greenpoint, with its variety of shops. Eventually I learned that the space had been a men's suit shop, but I was more interested in creating a store in which the content mirrored the disorientation experienced viewing it. Initially I thought of mirroring a psychic's business, but there was something about it that felt predictable. That's when the store became a self-help, life-building, or life-changing store offering nonspecific services. In a way, what is offered in the store is intangible and impermanent.

*Potential Store Fronts* will be on view at 125 Maiden Lane in New York through June 24.  
For more information on Beth Campbell and *Potential Store Fronts*, visit:  
[www.publicartfund.org/pafweb/projects/07/campbell/campbell-07.html](http://www.publicartfund.org/pafweb/projects/07/campbell/campbell-07.html)