



## CASSETTE TAPES AND SOUNDSCAPES: Creating Poetic Soundscapes Using C90 Cassette Tape Recordings as Performative Props and Memory Machines

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As a performance poet, I like to combine spoken performance and visual storytelling and use an array of visual props that often recycle my personal past archive of artworks as an artist from the last twenty-five years into the present. Conversely, this Perspective article is a reflective account of how I make use of sound during my live solo performances by way of C90 cassette tape recordings I have made spanning the course of 30–40 years. Whilst the article refers to a selection of live (poetry) performance works that I have made, the article concentrates discussion on three works which use cassette tape recordings in different ways to create soundscapes that often transport the listener to the past and/or the listener is unsure of how many voices there are in the performance space. The first performance I discuss is *How Can I Get My Partner To Be My Finger?* (2019) which presents a conversation between a couple – one present, one technologically distant – my partner Alex and I and refer to and discuss how Alex ‘speaks through’ my finger via a tape-recording. In discussion of the second performance, *SEE ME: A Walk Through London’s Gay Soho 1994 and 2020* (2021), I refer to how I make performative use of a mixtape compilation that I made in 1994. Lastly, in discussion of the third performance, *Tackle* (2022), I refer to my usage of a cassette recording in 1996 of a football match I attended with my Dad between Chelsea and Manchester United.

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## **Introduction**

### **Doublethink**

*I rummage through life's leftover marks  
 Traces from a previous exhibition  
 Text left on a wall,  
 plinths not yet been removed,  
 drawings now dumped in a corner as rubbish  
 I am for a poetry of embodied debris,  
 left in the aftermath  
 Speaking bodies caught  
 between memory and everyday life,  
 between private, public and pop-cultural history,  
 between present and absent  
 whilst recognising the crossfire of staying  
 in the comfort blanket of past violence  
 and possible future self-liberation*

*She left behind many scrapbook albums in her passing  
 Scrapbooks full of seaside postcards  
 of Britain making do with the beaches that we have  
 Postcard snapshots of a less cosmopolitan England,  
 Englishness and a nostalgia for an England  
 that may or may not have existed  
 but did at least in my mother's mind*

*1990s pop music mixtapes and Chelsea football matches  
 I recorded off the radio onto cassette  
 Drawings I made by hand  
 in the late Eighties of a young Rupert Everett starring as  
 hunky schoolboy in *Another Country* (1984)  
 Embodied in every pencil mark:  
 desire, discomfort, emancipation, shame  
 Those drawn marks – traces of elegy indexical of  
 the person I once was,  
 the person I am proud I left behind,  
 and the person I wish I never had to be*

*Collapsing and combusting past and present,  
these portals help connect us with the now gone  
Conduits to access the absent, welcome or not*

*Mum's memory objects, hidden from sight,  
dormant in boxes for years,  
prompted my own sea change in archive fever  
Reanimate the archive  
Use your own archive of the past  
as calls for action in the present  
Make traces and memory objects come alive again  
Ventriloquist objects surviving fine without operator*

*I love rewinding my old mixtape cassettes  
by hand with pencils through their eyes,  
conjuring memories and traces in my mind  
of people, places and things  
with every turn  
Each turn though, a doublethink,  
sweet as first kiss  
painful as first heartbreak*

*Traces become invitations  
to be there again  
in the here and now,  
to feel exactly what it was like  
to be in that place at that time  
The moment is live  
Will this invitation be one you accept?*

The above poem that accompanies my poetry film *Doublethink* (2025) is a meditation on memory, the traces left behind, and the complex relationships we have with the past. It aims to bring to life the idea that traces—whether physical objects, snapshots, or sounds—are not just remnants of what has been, but powerful forces that shape how we experience the present. I speak of rummaging through these remnants, these ‘embodied debris,’ as a form of re-engagement with both personal and collective histories. I invite its listener/reader to consider how memory is not static, but alive, constantly reshaping itself in our minds, intertwined with nostalgia, loss, and the

longing to return to—or escape from—what once was. The poem’s references to mixtapes, postcards, and personal drawings are not just nostalgic, but deeply layered with emotion, offering windows into the self you were and the self you’ve become. The concept of doublethink captures the tension of revisiting these traces: they are sweet and painful, comforting and uncomfortable, as they force us to confront who we were and who we are now. I describe these traces as ‘invitations’—inviting us to be present in those moments again but also challenging us to make sense of them in the now. The poem aims to capture the essence of how we live between these two worlds: the one we’ve left behind and the one we’re still navigating. The archive, as the poem puts it, becomes something alive, a place where past and present are in constant dialogue. I hope that the poem gives those traces weight and power, asking us whether we’re ready to accept their invitation and engage with them once more.

Recollection of memory (through traces and memory objects as I refer to in the poem) and one’s life experiences informing one’s identity has underpinned much of my multidisciplinary practice as an artist since the late 1990. I describe my practice as an exploration of memory, identity, and the layers of time we carry with us. Most recently, since November 2020, I have built a body of work consisting of memoir style pieces of writing in the form of short poems that all contain varying levels of humour about my identity as a gay man where upon each presentation of a poem (as a live solo performance spoken aloud by me or presented as a poetry film I have produced), the audience get segments of my gay identity from teenager to adulthood with me disclosing more and more personal details in each poem. Each performance includes one or more physical props that recycle my personal past archive of artworks as an artist from the last twenty-five years into the present. Often the objects/props that I use have some relation to the past whilst the poetry is often my reflections of the past in the present (often with a little fantasy/fiction often mixed in with the fact/actual events and my life experiences). This archive includes paintings and drawings and other objects such as photocopies of pages from a (now destroyed) giant scrapbook of images I kept as a teenager between 1993–1998 (Campbell, 2023). I use this personal archival imagery to create what I refer to as ‘picture book poetry’ (Note 1).

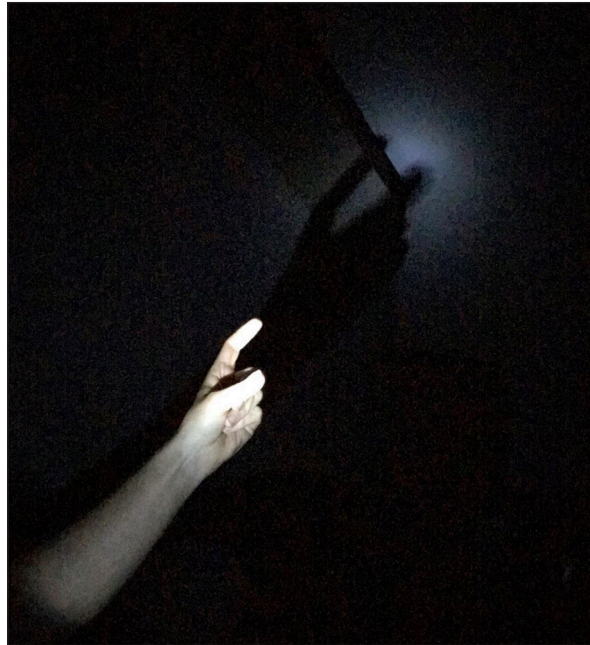
The cassette tape and its usage within artistic practice has been a source of inspiration for not just me but for many other creative practitioners. For example, David Wojnarowic’s innovative usage of a tape player with *3 Teens Kill*, Radek Szlaga’s recent paintings that illustrate cassette tapes that punch on memory and nostalgia to the usage of the cassette tape by the toilet attendance in Wim Wenders’ film *Perfect Days* (2023). Inspired myself by those reference points, this article focuses discussion

on three performances which employ one aspect of my personal archive: cassette tape recorders and cassette tape recordings (Note 2).

During discussion of the first work, *How Can I Get My Partner To Be My Finger?* (2019), I explain how I present a conversation between a couple – one present, one technologically distant – my partner Alex and I and refer to and discuss how Alex ‘speaks through’ my finger via a tape-recording. Then in discussion of the second work, *SEE ME: A Walk Through London’s Gay Soho 1994 and 2020* (2021), I refer to how I make performative use of a mixtape compilation that I made in 1994. During the live performance of the work, whilst I listen to the compilation played out loud on a Sanyo Talkbook recorder, I read aloud a poem that I wrote in 2020 reflecting upon walk that I made through Soho, London during 1994 and how that sharply contrasts with me doing the same walk and listening to the same tape during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in London in July 2020. Lastly, in discussion of the third and final work, *Tackle* (2022), I discuss my usage of a cassette recording in 1996 of a football match that I attended with my Dad between Chelsea and Manchester United. During the live performance of the work, whilst I listen to the compilation played out loud on a Sanyo Talkbook cassette recorder so the audience can listen along with me, I read aloud a poem that I wrote in 2022 which reflects upon how my experience of watching the match was completely different to that of my Dad’s.

### **The Speaking Body: *How Can I Get My Partner to Be My Finger?* (2019)**

The speaking body is very present in much of my live performance practice since 2019 (and subsequent poetry films that mediate the live performances). For example, the speaking fist in *Spokesfist* (2023), the speaking finger in *Trigger Finger* (2024) and *F.I.L.F* (2024), and the speaking thumb, *Indignant Thumb* (2024) (Note 3). The first performance that I made which explored the finger as a form of ventriloquism and included me using a cassette tape recording as part of a performance was *How Can I Get My Partner to Be My Finger?* (2019) (Note 4) that was first performed in March 2019 at Conditions in Croydon. It is a performance of tensions between the active and the passive of who is in control and who is being a puppet. Between the live and the mediated. Dialogues that oscillate between persuasion and control. Between the found and the spontaneous, the controlled and the supposedly uncontrolled. Between the supposedly intimate and the constructed. Between the demonic and the personal. What does it mean to speak for another when you are the kind of subject (gay) that is not meant to have a relationship to another? This performance is a conversation with the other through the self as a means of othering oneself – bringing the (speaking) body, a bodily intimacy back into the realm of speech and discourse in a complex and deceptively simple manner.



**Figure 1:** *How Can I Get My Partner To Be My Finger?* Performance by Lee Campbell (2019).

Whilst there has been very little discussion of homoeroticism in the work of dramaturg Samuel Beckett, in a pitch-black space, a spotlight is shone on my finger in a similar stage set-up to how the mouth appearing disembodied was illuminated in Samuel Beckett's stage direction for *Not I* (1958) (Figure 1). What follows is a conversation between a couple – one present, one technologically distant – my partner Alex and I. Alex 'speaks through' my finger via a tape-recording. At times, it's difficult to hear Alex but in relationships it's often hard to understand the other person. Sometimes I 'speak for' Alex. The big question is: is it Alex speaking or is it me speaking? The most proximate, the most intimate, the most utterly strange is the stranger within me. And the same for Alex.

The performance builds up tensions and then releases those tensions in much the same as the mechanisms of comedy. These tensions are built up using sets of unknown questions/set of words and phrases from somebody else (my fiancée, Alex) and how I improvise around these – the improvisation of someone else who is not actually there but 'speaks through' my finger. What is really speaking through the finger? What body/psychical part? What social relation? The finger is the most primitive version of a puppet yet can still embody some expression. Ventriloquism in art hasn't been exhausted at all. This performance presents my finger whose subjectivity is a multiplicity rather than a split personality showing that what we take to be interiority comes from the outside – we are literally speaking the world that we have been born into.



**Figure 2:** *How Can I Get My Partner To Be My Finger?* Performance by Lee Campbell (2019).

The performance serves up multi-layers, multi-voices: mine, me speaking in place of Alex (the voice of the finger) and Alex's (actual) voice being played through a tape cassette recording (note the red light of the cassette tape recorder in **Figure 2**) which creates a bizarre displaced refigured sense of intimacy (**Figure 2**). Yet, throughout the entire performance the viewer is unsure where the voices are coming from, how many voices there are, whether the rewind was recorded etc. It appears there is no distinction between 'self' and 'other'. When I pretend to be Alex, I am literally having an argument with myself.

From previous works of art and performance I had made exploring issues around sharing, participation and trying to wrestle with the other and the other as people who don't have sight or othering (Campbell, 2017, 2019). *How ...* works with literally the most proximate other to me, my partner. It is weirdly moving and perverse, universal yet profound, especially when during the work my partner is being so brilliantly destructive.

Something deeply intimate but radically outside of me. Being simultaneously performer/writer and performer/director/actor, I use my finger in a similar manner to the ventriloquism performed by Danny in the Stanley Kubrick film *The Shining* (1980) (speaking through one's finger), a 'voice' from the finger comes from my partner Alex who pre-records (sometimes awkward, difficult, intimate, personal, humorous) phrases/questions into a cassette tape recorder in different voices I hear them coming from the finger every time I press play. I have had to train myself to put myself in a

frame of mind to occupy a space of candidness in front of people with the finger without limiting myself. The performance becomes a potential site of conflict or revelation and just using finger feels much more like I am confronting myself. Alex works with what he knows to be my triggers. As the conversation unfolds, I try to control a narrative between me and Alex which I can't control. The conversation is ripe with absurdist dialogue and humour produced in my effort to try and control the (collective) narrative through the conversation. The question of marriage and getting a dog acts as an umbrella, a comedy frustration which through the course of the performance breaks down into these smaller dissonances which are humorous. Weird inversions taken place – the more controlling I become, the more feminine I become – then I am also the dominant one. I am effectively having a relationship with a voice box that won't do what I want it to do; this is reminiscent of those kinds of slippages that happen in relationships. Whilst the recording allows me to replay things which I wouldn't be able to do in real life, it creates an interesting distance that reveals something; in relationships we hear what we want to hear and sometimes that might be hearing confrontational things that we may not like. In many ways, Alex is making a critique of me the pedagogue, of my pedagogical position. He is non-cooperating – the ultimate non-co-operator for a pro-participatory pedagogical practice. He is constantly trying to put a spanner in the cooperation. My frustrations throughout the whole performance are bubbling to the surface that are in response to these contingent tape recordings; this tension gives the entire performance an uncertain, strangely haunting, ultimate mundane quality. Remarkably of the work, audience members have previously commented, 'Moments that are beautiful and confusing were when I was listening to a voice and projecting that voice onto a finger, moments when the voice coming from the finger wasn't the body that was in the space but was another body. I lost track of how many people/ how many selves there were in the room. when I started to lose track is when the work becomes great' and '[the work] throws its audience into a headspace of questioning what/where the subconscious comes from. I felt like I was witnessing someone falling into insanity somehow – like a psychosis'.

### **Documenting Queer Pandemic Experience: *SEE ME: A Walk Through London's Gay Soho in 1994 and 2020* (2021)**

The COVID-19 pandemic lockdown was certainly a time for introspection, voluntary or imposed. Many people felt their sense of selfhood eroded by lockdown, but it no doubt hit the LGBTQ community harder. Lockdown forced me to use what was at hand to me – recycling the old mix tapes I still had as a teenager into my experimental film practice. I guess though bricolage is something I've always done in terms of making



collages that I did as a teenager. The idea of building a queer identity was so different pre-Internet. In the manner of bricolage – building /constructing what is at hand/available, as a teenager I could be said to be the queer bricoleur. At the end of the day I had to experience the same cultural elements (as heterosexual folk around me) and make something entirely different with it. I was seeing things in things that were not (necessarily) meant for queer people. I was making things queer, these little building blocks in my identity and it was not meant to be there at all.

Whilst LGBTQ+ writers/artists/poets Frank O'Hara, David Wojnarowicz, Sarah Schulman, Edmund White, and Lee Lynch are known for their vivid 20th-century depictions of walking and sexuality, little writing about urban walking experiences by contemporary LGBTQ+ writers and artists exists. Inspired by the music video accompanying Massive Attack's *Unfinished Sympathy* (1991) where the singer Shara Nelson walks around streets in Los Angeles and Jacques Tati's surreal filmic direction, in Summer 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, I recorded sections of a walk that I made through Soho, London using my mobile phone. As I walk down the streets that were so important in shaping my life as a young gay man discovering my homosexuality whilst living in London circa 1994, I revisit the gay bars and pubs that have been my safe spaces for the last twenty years and more, spaces that are now closed. In this 'new normal,' I asked myself the questions: 'What spaces are available for queer people to perform their visibility?', 'What is the future of those spaces that I discovered on my walk that are currently closed?' and 'Will the queer people that once inhabited these spaces become invisible/unseen as their safe spaces have disappeared?'. For me, then, I was walking through a dystopia, tinged with an elegiac sadness and melancholy whilst trying to stay optimistic. As I made my walk, I listened to a mixtape compilation I made in 1994 which I listened to when I first discovered London's Gay Soho in the Summer of that year as a (not then yet 'out') sixteen-year old teenager. Music that you listen to does inform you (particularly so when you are a teenager). For me it was really difficult growing up at that time in the Nineties listening to music about teenage heterosexuals. As a gay guy, I could identify more to Madonna than a heterosexual man yet she's taking about heterosexual men. I had to imagine schoolgirl teen heartthrob boy bands (Take That, Backstreet Boys etc.) were singing love songs to me as a gay man. There were no Sam Smiths or other openly queer singers that I knew of at the time who were singing directly to a queer object (audience). I remember video recording *Pray* (1993) by Take That on The Chart Show onto VHS in 1993 and playing the few second clip of Jason Orange in his underwear over and over again. My burgeoning homoerotic imagination was on fire but what was fuelling this were images of men intended for a straight female audience.

Attempting to create a very original way to document lockdown, I took the recordings of the walk I had made and made a short film which weaved across sound, image, time, rhythm and place called *SEE ME: A Walk Through London's Gay (Un)Seen* (2020) (this title is a play on words: seen/scene, unseen/unscene). This film is made up of a number of layers both sound and visual layered on top of one another, talking to and informing each other. It is made using digital transfer versions of c90 tape compilations I made between 1992–1995, juxtaposed with moving image footage of me in 2018 and 2020 and a typeface font graphic 'See Me' that I designed in 2005. The c90 cassette on screen is the cassette compilation that I still have from 1994. 1994 frames the film in time as the age before widescreen TV. I would describe the film as an odyssey into the past is a stimulating evocation of how identity is formed and celebrated – and lost, albeit temporarily if the human condition's ability to recover its sense of self resumes its familiar position in life.

In 2021, I produced a new version of the film, *SEE ME: A Walk Through London's Gay Soho in 1994 and 2020* (2021) which has so far been shortlisted for the prestigious Out-Spoken Prize for Poetry, Southbank Centre, London in 2023 and Winner of Best Experimental at Ealing Film Festival, 2022, as well as being included in many film festivals internationally (Note 5). A friend had commented that year I have a particular voice from a particular point in London queer history and that my voice and my accent evidence my life so clearly – a specific voice that gives me a specific identity to a specific place. With this in mind, I wrote a poem which I then I recorded and layered over the top of the first *SEE ME* film. This true collage of sound and image, with an abstract continuity of the cassette/eyes. Although a personal history, it is also a social one.

During the live performance of *SEE ME*, I enter the space listening to my original Summer 1994 mixtape which immediately brings the past into the present. The poem begins with reflecting upon my Summer 1994 walk through Soho as described above. At the point in the poem where I speak about my reflections of the area during the same walk that I did in 2020, I rewind the tape, so the audience get to hear the same music being played. This rewinding of the and then reflecting upon how I was (in terms of my identity and sexual awakening etc.) at the time made during the 1994 walk paired with how I feel doing the walk in 2020 was directly inspired by the usage of cassette tape recording in Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958) where Krapp listens to and reflects upon recordings he made when he was much younger. I like to perform this poem with the poetry film version being screened as a backdrop to create a multidimensional experience for the audience (**Figures 3–4**).



**Figure 3:** Performance of *SEE ME* at *Runt of the Litter*. Performance by Lee Campbell, London (May 2022).



**Figure 4:** Performance of *SEE ME* at *Runt of the Litter*. Performance by Lee Campbell, London (May 2022).

### Balls and sports, men in shorts: *Tackle* (2022)

From the live euphoria of football, to homosexual desire and the macho body in action, the pitch is a patchwork of memory. *Tackle* is beginning. Roll up and take your seats ...

As a child, one of my first memories was Saturday afternoons in the living room and the sound of the commentators during football matches I used to watch with my Dad. Claiming football at the same time as claiming who I am, *Tackle* is a spoken word performance centred around a football match commentary from 1996. Part of the performance includes me reading a poem aloud that I have written which, acting like me sharing an internal monologue, involves me outing myself in amongst the noise of the football match. Drawing parallels between footie and my sexuality by taking a critical view of football, the poem tackles homophobia within football. Observant of English leisure rituals, Englishness and a nostalgia for an England that may or may not have existed, this performance involves me listening to a tape recording I made of a live radio commentary of a football match between two regional teams, Chelsea v Manchester. Even 'tackle' is 1970s slang. The performance begins with me entering the performance space shouting 'In the football stadium I learnt, bigger the fish bigger the tackle!' and then press play on the hand held cassette recorder.



**Figure 5:** Performance of *Tackle* at The Glitch, Lee Campbell, London (October 2022).

Holding the cassette recorder to my ear because football fans would often hold a radio to their ears whilst at the match in the 70s and 80s, the recording transforms the performance space into a football stadium (**Figure 5**).

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> To see examples of 'picturebook poetry' in action, please visit <https://filmfreeway.com/S159>.
- <sup>2</sup> To watch recordings of these three performances, please visit: <https://filmfreeway.com/SW1>.
- <sup>3</sup> To see the poetry film versions of these works, please visit: <https://filmfreeway.com/LeeCampbell>.
- <sup>4</sup> To watch a recording of this performance, please visit: <https://filmfreeway.com/HOWCANIGETMYPARTNERBEMY-FINGER>.
- <sup>5</sup> To watch *SEE ME: A Walk Through London's Gay Soho in 1994 and 2020* (2021), please visit: <https://filmfreeway.com/SEEMEAWALKTHROUGHLONDONSGAYSOHOIN1994AND2020>.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

## Author Information

Dr Lee Campbell is an artist and Senior Lecturer at University of the Arts London. He has performed extensively across the world since 2000 including solo performances for National Poetry Library, Brighton Fringe, Whitstable Biennale and Prague Biennale. He has been numerously interviewed by the BBC since 2008 including BBC Radio 4's Midweek He will be headlining Rhymes and Stitches in January 2025 and will be featured poet at Oxford Poetry Library and Big Trouble. Rochester later in 2025. His debut poetry collection 'See Me: An (Almost) Autobiography' was published by London Poetry Books in November 2024. Other publications of his poetry include The Atticus Review, Ink, Sweat and Tears, Otherwise, You Are Here – The Journal of Creative Geography, Step Away Magazine, London Grip and Flight of the DragonFly. His chapbook 'Queering the Landscape' was shortlisted for the 2024 Broken Spine Chapbook Poetry Competition. His experimental performance poetry films have been selected for many international film festivals and prizes since 2019 including shortlisted for BEST POETRY FILM at the Out-Spoken Poetry Prize 2023, Queen Elizabeth Hall, Southbank Centre, London.

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