

ARTFORUM

MAY 2010



Duncan Campbell

ARTISTS SPACE

Less than two years after starting production of the DMC-12 luxury car, the DeLorean Motor Company abruptly closed in 1982, leaving thousands of workers unemployed. Supported by generous subsidies from the UK government, the factory had been set up in a working-class district of Northern Ireland by the can-do American entrepreneur John DeLorean, who would later be charged with involvement in smuggling cocaine in a last-ditch attempt to raise money to save the company. (He was eventually acquitted.) The appeal of the DeLorean car survived these travails, however, and it arguably found its true calling as the iconic time-traveling vehicle in

Back to the Future (1985). Its gull-wing doors and brushed steel body had always embodied a seductive fantasy of the future. In reality, however, it had the looks and little else. The steel made it too heavy to accelerate fast, and the doors were prone to leaking.

Parts of this story are retold in Duncan Campbell's fifty-one-minute-long video *Make it new John*, 2009, recently on view at Artists Space along with a fascinating collection of related ephemera—magazine advertisements, correspondence, packing slips, company neckties, etc., all emblazoned with the stylishly symmetrical DMC logo. But many of the “key facts”—including *Back to the Future* and DeLorean's court case—go entirely unmentioned in Campbell's film essay—*cum*—history documentary. Told through a mixture of archival material and fictional scenes, without voice-over guidance, the story of ambition gone awry appears as a drama of quasi-Shakespearean dimensions. Simultaneously, it rubs awkwardly against our present moment, functioning as a resonance chamber for the fantasies, hypocrisies, and inequities of global neoliberalism.

The video is historical, then, in a literary rather than an academic sense. It moves chronologically from a black-and-white rendition of an American childhood to a portrayal of US car culture in its heyday. We hear Ronny and the Daytonas singing the praises of the Pontiac GTO—the first “muscle car,” which was one of DeLorean's early successes at General Motors—before we transition to scenes of the 1970s oil crisis. The subsequent, central section of the video largely comprises archival footage of DeLorean himself, at first full of optimism, vaunting the merits of his car, and then increasingly evasive and exasperated as the peripeteia becomes irrefutable. Interspersed with this footage are shots of smarmy politicians who verge on self-parody, excited car salesmen, disgruntled factory workers, and advertising spots for the car. The final section is a staged conversation (from a script Campbell composed from archival material) between a calm-voiced, unseen interviewer and some workers participating in a sit-in shortly before the closing of the plant. Each man finds an excuse to leave until only one, also named John, is left, whose unease visibly increases as the line of inquiry becomes more personal. Before the screen goes blank, he announces that he'll wait for the others to come back. Campbell is at his most heavy-handed here, as his version of the Farewell Symphony turns into a Beckettian valediction to Fordism and the identity it prescribed for generations of men.

Even in such moments, however, Campbell avoids spelling out any of the “lessons” of history that are written into his subject. Yet, in view not least of the financial crisis, it is impossible not to see the narrative of the video as a case study or even as a paradigm. Some of its allegorical implications probe the roots of modern Western ideology. The significance of the car speaks for itself—for instance, when we see a television ad that unabashedly demands, as the DeLorean's gull-wing doors swing open, LIVE THE DREAM. In another scene, a reporter from *Automotive News* tells us, “Everything that appeals to the US pioneer spirit, that's John DeLorean.” The story of the rise and fall of the DeLorean Motor Company thus functions as an open-ended parable, a meditation on failure brimming with suggestive parallels to recent events.

—Alexander Scrimgeour

Duncan Campbell, *Make it new John*, 2009, still from a color video, 51 minutes.

