



## Review

# Doug Hall: The Terrible Uncertainty of the Thing Described

By Maria Porges

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### On View

#### Walter and McBean Galleries, SFAI

March 28 - June 6, 2015

*Solo Show*

In 1989, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) acquired *The Terrible Uncertainty of the Thing Described* (1987), a large-scale installation work by Bay Area artist Doug Hall, known internationally for his work in a range of media. Combining multiple video images and projections with sculptural objects—a massive, tilted barrier of steel mesh and two oversize steel chairs periodically enlivened with spectacular arcs of electricity, courtesy of a real Tesla coil—the piece was shown at the museum's old home in the Veteran's Memorial Building that year.

Since the opening of the SFMOMA's Mario Botta-designed building in 1995, however, the piece has been unseen here in the Bay Area. Rumors suggested that the high voltage generated by the coil could not be accommodated by the complicated electrical/HVAC systems of the new building. Whatever the reason, SFMOMA's closure for expansion in 2013 has allowed for programming at other institutions around town ("SFMOMA on the Go"), creating an opportunity for the current co-presentation of Hall's piece at the San Francisco Art Institute's McBean Gallery.



Doug Hall. *The Terrible Uncertainty of the Thing Described*, 1987; installation view, San Francisco Art Institute, Walter and McBean Galleries. Collection of SFMOMA, purchased through a gift of the Modern Art Council and the San Francisco Art Dealers Association. © Doug Hall. Photo: Gregory Goode.

It is worth an extended visit. Until eyes become accustomed to the gloom of the darkened gallery, the most visible element is the six monitors perched on 8-foot-tall stands along the left wall, each hosting a continual program of video, which can also be seen in a large projection on the adjoining wall, above the entrance. Consisting of three channels, the twenty-minute-long loop spreads across these seven screens. Sometimes the same scene plays on two or three monitors, sometimes not, as the piece progresses through a sequence of sections that suggest the movements of a musical composition. Dawn on a farm's fields, the sky filled with black-and-white static, segues into multiple tornadoes. Surging masses of ocean waves and massive waterfalls fade into wildfire, then boiling clouds of smoke. The clouds shift and reveal a blast furnace or maybe a foundry, where glowing ingots slide by in slow motion and giant machines move on gantries in showers of sparks.

The through line of all of these mesmerizing images is the presence of raw power. Cutting back and forth between found footage and scenes Hall shot over a period of several years, sometimes working with videographer Jules Backus, the video wall—as well as the work as a whole—signals that we are subject not only to the forces of nature but to the unrelenting mediation of images of those forces. Sometimes the camera lingers on the pornography of destruction, but mostly it just allows us to experience the sublime: that shadowy combination of fear and attraction, set in motion by the uncontrollable might of nature.



Doug Hall. *The Terrible Uncertainty of the Thing Described*, 1987; video still, San Francisco Art Institute, Walter and McBean Galleries. Collection of SFMOMA, purchased through a gift of the Modern Art Council and the San Francisco Art Dealers Association. © Doug Hall. Photo: Gregory Goode.

Since this prescient installation first debuted, disaster images have become all too familiar, captured by professionals and amateurs alike. Videos are uploaded daily to YouTube, showing everything from tsunamis in Japan and Indonesia, to Hurricane Katrina's devastation, year after year of catastrophic tornado seasons, immense wildfires in New Mexico and here in California, and, most recently, the destruction resulting from Nepal's earthquake. Still, despite all we know—or think we know—Hall's installation remains deeply affecting.

This is due in part to the deliberate, dark theatricality of the work's sculptural elements. Across from the monitors, the dramatically tilted steel-mesh wall partly divides the space along its longer axis. On the barrier's other side, deep in the shadows, the two metal chairs are imprisoned in their own mesh enclosure (the arrangement eerily bringing to mind media images of Guantanamo) with their attendant generating machinery. Periodically, "lightning" courses alarmingly between the two chairs for a few seconds, crackling in whitish sprays. While standing behind the steel wall in order to view the chairs, it is still possible to see the videos, but only through the mesh—suggesting that Hall wants his viewers either to be reminded of our separation from nature, or made conscious of the fact that we are too tiny and weak to stand up to the tremendous forces alluded to in the scenes playing constantly before us. It is not clear whether we need to be penned in—protected from nature—or shielded from our own worst impulses.





Doug Hall. *The Terrible Uncertainty of the Thing Described*, 1987; installation view, San Francisco Art Institute, Walter and McBean Galleries. Collection of SFMOMA, purchased through a gift of the Modern Art Council and the San Francisco Art Dealers Association. © Doug Hall. Photo: Gregory Goode.

The chairs look like a pair of lethal thrones as the charge arcs back and forth between them every half hour, like the geysers in Yellowstone that blow out of the ground with stunning force on a schedule so regular that tourists can stand and wait for them. There is no posted schedule here, however, and no indication that anything will happen. It is possible to stand gazing at the mesmerizing video and miss the event. When it does take place, though, it is truly sublime: loud, terrifying, and as spectacular, in its own way, as the **extravaganzas of water and fire** the Baroque genius Lorenzo Bernini staged for his patrons.

Perhaps the most fascinating thing about Hall's seminal work is its quality of timelessness. Though clearly a product of the era in which it was made—both in terms of the now slightly dated-looking video components and the immersive staging of the installation overall—*The Terrible Uncertainty of the Thing Described's* ambition and intelligence reach simultaneously back toward the past and forward toward an uncertain future punctuated by ever-more-frequent disasters, both natural and human-made. Standing and patiently waiting for the explosion of lightning, I thought about the first time I had watched it spread from one chair to the other, what I had learned in the intervening twenty-five years, and what remains a mystery. In Edmund Burke's 1757 treatise *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*—the source for the title of Hall's work—he states: "When we know the full extent of any danger... a great deal of the apprehension vanishes."<sup>1</sup> As Hall's heaving walls of water and fire remind us, that knowledge is rare and fleeting. Most of the time we are in the dark, waiting apprehensively for something to happen, in the rupture Hall pictures for us, between image and reality.

**Doug Hall: *The Terrible Uncertainty of The Thing Described* is on view at Walter and McBean Galleries, SFAI, in San Francisco, through June 6, 2015.**

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## Notes

1. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Oxford, 1980), 54.