

The pervasive influence of television as a system of power is a major theme in the work of Doug Hall. Because of its widespread reach, television is an efficient vehicle through which power can be channeled and ultimately exercised. Hall explores how the manipulation of information results in the creation of archetypes. He focuses on the potency of imagery as it manifests itself in cultural conditioning and he attempts to deconstruct and demystify the resultant myths by asking how images are created and then perceived as replications of the original. Hall investigates how these stereotypes impact on individuality and on cultural values, exploring how propaganda, as a power construct, controls and molds our consciousness through selective representation. He comments on the passivity of the viewer in an electronic age, pinpointing television as the major culprit of a potentially inequitable arrangement.

The infiltration of image consumption through television underlies the Postmodern consciousness. Hall's involvement in such works as *Media Burn*, 1975, a collaborative effort by the Ant Farm collective, seems to be a virtual enactment of Jean Baudrillard's theory of implosion, in which the distinction between the medium and the real collapses. Since the television screens and the car windshield in the work both represent visual frames that separate the viewer from what is being viewed, this art event, in which a souped-up Cadillac "phantom dream car" was driven through a wall of flaming television sets, was a critical commentary on the power of illusion.

The 1960s was an era of spectacle in which television broadcast "live" events. The artifice of these replications was accented by the repetitive effect of multiple airings. Hall, like Dara Birnbaum, began to scrutinize the repercussions of this fictive spectacular space as a function of reinforcing institutionalized aspects of power and complicity. Hall writes: "The Spectacle affirms, at whatever cost, cultural values through all the means available to it....These Spectacles support cultural attitudes and serve to direct us as a society" (Chicago, p. 34). The immediacy of the TV broadcast effectively eliminates experiential reality by replicating, condensing, manipulating, and editing the original.

Hall works with images of power in order to critique society, but he leaves his conclusions ambiguous. In his video work *Storm and Stress*, 1986, he captured a distant tornado. By utilizing images of powerful natural phenomena, Hall queries real-reality versus image-reality. His re-creations of natural turbulence are investigations of visual and spatial orientation. Hall's renditions are reminiscent of Bill Viola's video works, which explore the parameters of temporality and the metaphysical by utilizing landscape imagery as a metaphor for realms of consciousness and states of being. A mountain may symbolize spiritual ascension or material reality; a storm might suggest mortality or regeneration. By juxtaposing grandeur and mundanity, Hall and Viola toy with notions of myth and primordial archetype.

In video installation the separation of audience and event is replaced by the realm of participation; the fact that customarily the visitor enters a three-dimensional space reintroduces direct experience into a complex electronic age. In his works Hall plays with notions of replication and interaction. The critic Bill Berkson writes: "Hall takes the idea of esthetic distance literally. He makes distance operative....Distance, like meaning, is

Doug Hall

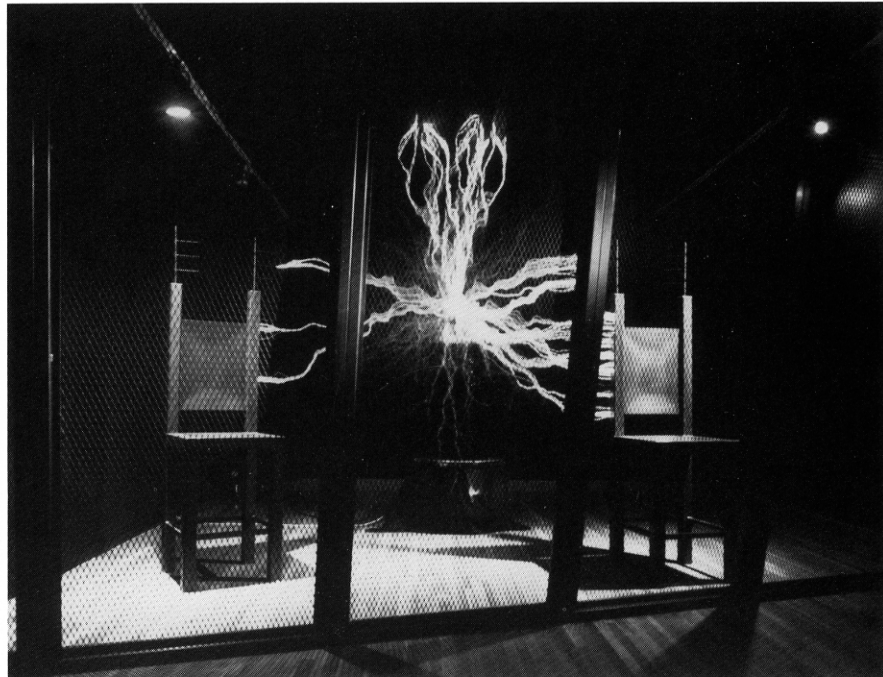
The Terrible Uncertainty of the Thing Described

1987

Three-channel video and electrical installation
and steel (fence, mesh, frame, chairs)
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, purchased
through a gift of the Modern Art Council and the
Art Dealers Association



reversible” (Berkson, p. 148). By capturing images on tape, Hall ultimately brings to the forefront issues of spectatorship. In *The Terrible Uncertainty of the Thing Described*, 1987, Hall toyed both literally and figuratively with symbols of power. Six video monitors mounted on steel poles and a large video image projected on the wall display scenes of natural force and turmoil: pitching seas, floods, fires, tornadoes, and storms. A mesh fence encloses two steel chairs and a tesla coil transformer that generates a million-volt high-frequency current which spiders out like lightning every half hour. The electricity connects with the steel chairs and sheet metal lining the ceiling and walls, creating a display reminiscent of a Hollywood version of Frankenstein’s laboratory. Hall presumably sets up a safe distance between the visitor and the storm, but the colossal explosion forces the visitor to confront its awesome reality. When the spectacle is over, one is left to ponder the simulacra of the video monitors and the imminent return of the energy blast.



**The Terrible Uncertainty
of the Thing Described** 1987

Photo courtesy San Francisco
Museum of Modern Art

**The Terrible Uncertainty
of the Thing Described** (detail)
1987

Video still
Photo courtesy San Francisco
Museum of Modern Art

