

# Doug Hall

## The Contradictions of Power

Meredith Tromble

*POWER FLICKERS THROUGH* Doug Hall's work, and not just in the wires of his video equipment. Hall has examined the social power of the media, the physical power of natural forces, and the philosophical power of perspective. He has explored many variations of his subject, but he always circles back to a fascination with great forces. Implicit in his subject are companion themes of the helplessness, fear, and awe experienced by humans confronting powers beyond their own.

The role of media imagery in creating and sustaining power relationships in society was the focus of his early work. In several events by T. R. Uthco—a performance collective that Hall formed with Diane Andrews Hall and Jody Procter in 1973—Hall assumed the role of “artist-president,” asserting that the presidential power of his image was as “real” (or unreal) as the power of the elected president. In the summer of 1975 he played another version of the “artist-president” in *The Eternal Frame*, a reenactment of the assassination of John F. Kennedy at the Dallas site of the shooting.

“We saw projects like those,” says Hall, “whether rightfully so or not, as intervening, peeling back the façade that was being presented by the culture. . . . The thing that astounded us was that people took the image to be meaningful, crying and having deep emotional reactions—particularly considering that I was Kennedy and we had a guy in drag playing Jackie.”

In other pieces Hall positioned himself on the downside of a power relationship. In *Thirty-two Feet per Second per Second* (1977) Hall and Procter spent eight hours sitting in chairs bolted to the façade of a gallery high above the street, perched at the edge of obliteration by a natural force: gravity. (The title refers to the rate at which gravity accelerates the motion of a falling body.)

In the early 1980s T. R. Uthco activities wound down, and Hall—no longer convinced that artistic interventions had the power to shape culture—turned from performance to

video and from themes of social power to a consideration of massive natural and technological forces. In the videotape *Songs of the Eighties* (1983), he appears in the first song, “Fear of Falling,” striding through the machinery of a power plant. The video *Storm and Stress* (1976) presents violent weather conditions as a metaphor for emotional life and the troublesome impact of technology on the natural world. These works

led to a dramatic installation called *The Terrible Uncertainty of the Thing Described* (1987), in which Hall's themes of industrial power, media power, and natural power coalesced. A huge Tesla coil sent electrical arcs crackling explosively between two steel chairs—sit-ins for human presence—as six video monitors showed images of forest fires, towering waves, tornadoes, and massive man-made machines.

A quieter vein emerged in Hall's installations and photographs of the next decade, such as *University* (1993) and *The Rome Project* (1997), which examined the architectural structures of institutional power at the University of California, Berkeley, and ancient Roman libraries and archives, respectively. In his most recent work, he pursues this interest in the power of constructed spaces into the landscape, with images of highways making tracks for the “vanishing point” of Western perspective. “I am interested in the fallacies of ‘rational’ ways of looking,” says Hall. “In the perspectival photographs, the end of the hallway or the end of the road is like a drain, a hole in the image. Everything seems to rush toward it. There's an authority that emanates from that space—it's very manipulative. It grabs you and plants you in front of it, but it also creates a vacuum that you imagine yourself traveling through.”

Oblivion awaits the mind that imagines itself as the center of the universe. Every viewpoint, every perspective, every sensation of power will vanish into that vacuum one day. In his work Hall returns again and again to this conundrum, revealing the paradoxical nature of power.



*Highway 447, Near Tohakum*, 1999  
R-print; 48 x 67½ in.



## Interview

by Meredith Tromble

**Your educational history suggests that you had a choice between several different careers. How did you begin as an artist?**

I studied art because I thought that it would allow me to engage issues that were of interest to me that had social and maybe political implications—it was the 1960s, after all. That era in educational institutions was really radical and exciting. There was a lot going on that did not fit neatly into institutional packages.

**You took the pre-architecture course at Harvard, which is interesting in regard to your work photographing libraries.**

I am very interested in issues relating to what I call “constructed space.” Architecture is an aspect of that. There are many kinds of constructed spaces—including architecture, media, advertising, and commodity culture—and they work with shared languages. The art world is pretty conservative in that it wants artists to work and manifest their ideas visually in a coherent stream. I move between media quite frequently, which creates a bit of confusion, at least visually. But the work consistently addresses questions about how we come to know things in the world and how our knowledge is constructed, both outside ourselves and within ourselves.

I'm now immersed, and have been for several years, in issues relating to perspective. There are other people who have thought deeply about perspective as a social construct. In Panofsky's

*Perspective as Symbolic Form*, he asks, “Why is it that in the West we organize pictorial space according to this perspectival cone? This cone of vision?” He says that if you look back to ancient times, they understood perspective but chose not to use it because it did not fit into the symbolic structure of their world. Following this argument into the work of Martin Jay, Jonathan Crary, and others, it seems that

they are saying that a rational way of looking into the world locates the individual as the important point from which the world is looked at. And the world avails itself to us because we position ourselves in a particular way. The world is available to us through rationality and logic, and the logic emanates from us. I am interested in the fallacies of purely rational ways of looking, in pointing out the kind of deceptions that are involved in that condition.

**In the performance *Walking Mission Street [1976]*, you and Jody Procter traversed the entire eight-mile length of Mission Street in San Francisco, walking in silence. Was the point of that piece to create an inner experience of the space for yourselves?**

No, it was an image. We were following a marker through a series of zones, a series of situations called psycho-geographical spaces, which were all different, and we were the thing that was consistent through it. I would like to believe that there is emotional and psychological content in my work, but I don't think it ever provided an expressionist moment.

**Power keeps resurfacing as a theme in your work.**

I don't want to sound as if I work these things out beforehand; it's not like that. I have inclinations, suppositions that I want to pursue, although I can't even give language to them at the time. For example, *The Terrible Uncertainty of the Thing Described [1987]* started with a vague notion of how we position ourselves in front of momentous happenings, which occur in both natural and industrial circumstances. I looked for the connection between the thing that happens in nature and how it reappears in industry, from a forest fire, say, to an ore-smelting plant. That's the physical level, but the connection also has a larger spiritual or ontological level. It's the relationship between the natural sublime and the industrial or urban sublime.

**So in looking at that relationship, the spiritual or ontological level has to do with seeing the connections between them?**

Right. It's also trying to get away from the simple-minded construct “culture is bad and nature is good.” There is something our humanness wants, glorious replications of things that happen in nature that are both terrifying and beautiful and suggest a power that is beyond reason. For me, this ties into the issues you referenced earlier, issues of power. It's the power of images, and it's the power of the conditions that we construct out of our own desires. It's not by chance that we perceive things as we do and that we replicate them in certain forms. I like working with that stuff.



*State Archive at Sant Ivo alla Sapienza, Rome, 1997*  
From the Rome Project  
Type C print; 62 x 48 in.



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

Four-channel video installation with sculptural, sound, and electronic elements; 144 x 360 x 480 in.

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, purchased through the Modern Art Council and the San Francisco Art Dealers Association



***The Eternal Frame***, 1975

Photograph of performance