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**VIDEOWORKS
BY DOUG HALL**

by Kathy Rae Huffman

Video has played a significant role in the performance, installation, and collaborative work of Doug Hall. His art, as manifested in media, drawings and sculptural forms, demonstrates a keen consciousness of how power systems affect individuals, and ultimately lead to social change. By using familiar narrative conventions derived from authoritarian mass media models, Hall stresses the inherent power of television stereotypes, and especially the subconscious affects they have on their captive and generally trusting viewers. His aesthetic considerations are tightly structured from mediated images, codes and metaphoric symbols, all charged with wit and satire. His concerns also encompass the flip side of aggression: passive, pusillanimous behavior as a collective contemporary attitude, a growing weakening of the human spirit that he attributes in part to the influence of broadcast television. Hall's work is infused with wisdom, as expressed in humor, irony, and cynicism: it ranges between the sensational and the sublime. The videotape program in this exhibition was selected to isolate works by Hall and his collaborators which form the precedents for his investigation into the *THE SPECTACLE OF IMAGE*.

Hall has incorporated the power of communication with authoritative language and images throughout his career. Since his days as a graduate, studying sculpture, he has investigated video in several different forms. One of his earliest uses of media technology (and its controlling factors) was an installation he inhabited entitled *Inner Space Simulation Module* (1969). The audience had access to him with live video, audio, film and other inputs: he was his own media victim. The experience of being subjected to the effects and demands of this confinement greatly influenced him. In fact, from this time on, throughout his early video guerilla actions, Hall's personal presence as a protagonist has been important and in this role he has provided provocative insights and biting political commentaries. As a performer, Hall induces trust through the use of fictional, charismatic personas. More recently, however, he has stepped away from the camera, and has become a careful observer who articulates the position of the individual in confrontation with natural and industrial force in lyrical broadcast works and sculptural environments.

Doug Hall, Diane Andrews Hall and Jody Procter formed T.R. UTHCO in 1973 as a performance collaborative utilizing sound, and slides, as well as live and pre-recorded video. For several years, T.R. UTHCO presented performances around the country at artists' spaces, museums and University theatres and art galleries. Their works (sometimes presented several times) include "A Graduation Address" (1973), "You Scratch Your Head While I Pick My Nose" (1973), "Great Moments" (1974-75), and "Standing Man" (1974). Hall and Procter's fear of height was exposed in "Thirty-two Feet Per Second Per Second" (1976), where both men were tied to chairs on a ledge of a San Francisco building. Reminiscent of British artists Gilbert and George, they were also painted white as living sculpture and as part of the building facade. The day long ordeal was recorded on video by Diane Andrews Hall. In another performance, "Really, I've Never Done Anything Like That Before, He Said" (1977) the two men were bound together with rope out of view from the audience. Live and pre-recorded video presented their "ordeal" to the public in an outer gallery.



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Many of T.R. UTHCO's performances were videotaped live and later incorporated into discrete video works. Overall, the 1970s was an era of personal exploration and physical challenge for the artists. Since neither they nor the institutions who produced or commissioned performances maintained adequate equipment the resulting works involved risk, improvisation and robust good times. T.R. UTHCO (permanently located on the West Coast by the mid-1970s) participated in the live public performance "Media Burn" with ANT FARM, a Bay Area collaborative of architects and media critics in 1975. The notorious event was staged at San Francisco's Cow Palace. The documentation, also entitled *Media Burn*, is now considered a classic tape. It depicts the customized 1959 Cadillac "Phantom Dream Car" as it smashes through a wall of burning TV sets, documented by a video camera in a special four foot (centered) tail fin. This action symbolically celebrated America's addiction to TV. Not only was this the first public performance where Doug Hall appeared in his role as "the artist-president," it was an event about media coverage that signaled the beginning of Hall's serious involvement in large scale media events as spectacle.

In the summer of 1975, T.R. UTHCO traveled to Dallas with ANT FARM to reenact the assassination of John F. Kennedy,¹ a performance for videotape that was later presented as an installation and a tape entitled *The Eternal Frame*. Mixing black and white and color footage, the tape established the pretense of live news coverage. "Artist-newsmen" gathered comments on the street from the spectators witnessing the performance as well as from the audience attending a "preview" screening of the reenactment footage. As a cynical depiction of media spectacle, Hall willingly admitted the seemingly "bad taste" of this project. He discussed it as a necessary catharsis, recreated in order to distance not only himself, but everyone, from the memory of television's representation of the world-shattering incident. It is an important work of black humor that "deals with horrific aspects of contemporary life and of achieving a fresh perspective on topics otherwise sacred or taboo."² In his role as "the artist-president," Hall states: "The content of the image I present is no different than the image itself . . . I am and have always been just an image on your television screen," reminding us that our response to artistic events,

as well as Kennedy's death, are shaped by the forms and conventions of network television.

Hall's residency concepts continued to develop during the next two years (1976-77), and he conceived of a three-part project in which he would be an artist-in-residence with a pro sports team, a TV news team and as part of the executive team in the White House, continuing his fantasy role as "the artist-president." He became an artist team member of the San Francisco Giants in 1977. The experience resulted in a tape entitled *Game of the Week*. His baseball residency "was about the fantasy of elusive fame, and the misshapen societal values that invariably place the strong over the smart, the physical over the intellectual and spiritual."³ By 1979, working independently and with other artists, Hall had developed positive and creative associations that offered opportunities to participate in many novel events and actions, both spontaneous and calculated. Likewise, Hall's energetic and theatrical creation of a persona magnified the reality of any particular event.

Doug Hall, Jody Procter and Chip Lord became artists-in-residence with the Pro News team during the Spring of 1979 at KVII, Amarillo, Texas (the local ABC affiliate), extending an association that originally began with ANT FARM's environmental sculpture "Cadillac Ranch" (1974) on route 66 in Texas.⁴ It was an ingenious plan that provided the perfect situation for a discourse on the news media, resulting in *The Amarillo News Tapes*. As artists, their goal was "to dissect what makes news in a small mid-Western television market and to interact with working professionals in a mass media format."⁵ When the artist-newscasters followed the Pro News team to the scene of the devastating aftermath of a tornado, they created a unique story of their own in which they "dissected and reconstructed using file footage and studio set-ups."⁶ The discovery of the power of violent weather became a focus in Hall's work several years later. *The Amarillo News Tapes* was broadcast and presented as an installation with photos and news texts gathered during the residency in Texas.

During the early 1980s Hall and his collaborators received considerable international recognition for their video work at festivals and in exhibitions. *The Amarillo News Tapes* received recognition at the first American Film Institute National Video Festival, at Protopia 81 in Japan, and at INPUT,⁷ to name a few. But at that time, Hall began to work more and more independently, feeling the need to develop more thoroughly the themes and ideas explored in his performance works and collaborations. His individual works during 1980-81 included a new performance/installation, "For Long Periods of Time He Didn't Know Who He Was Or How He Got There In The First Place," which was presented at The Maryland Institute; the original performance of "Songs of the Eighties"—destined to become a video work later—presented at the San Francisco alternative space 80 Langton Street; as well as an installation *The Great Confrontation* at the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art. In October 1982, Hall was invited to The Western Front in Vancouver, British Columbia as the artist-in-residence for performance.

Hall continued to develop videotape critiques of authority by exposing political posturing and apparently espousing empty rhetoric in shorter works during 1982. *The Speech* combines written text and language. Re-cast as "the artist-president," he formulaically recites attributes of leadership using the same kind of phrase over and over, ending with the words that "he" is . . . "the ultimate victory of form over content," revealing his image as the content. This video was presented as an installation and placed at the entrance to the *Awards in the Visual Arts* exhibition.⁸ The monitor was positioned above eye level, with large state flags on either side. From the television, Hall looked the public "in the eye," the picture of an honest, self-reliant public figure. *This is the Truth* was produced during that same year as a prelude to a then planned video *Songs of the Eighties*. Like *The Speech*, which is dense with political parody, *This is the Truth* also presents the artist in the role of authority, but now in a satiric role delivering sanctimonious statements like "spread joy to others," "obey the laws," and "only the strong succeed" as meaningless platitudes.

¹John Fitzgerald Kennedy (1917-1963), assassinated November 22, 1963.

²John Minkowsky, *Video/TV: Humor/Comedy*, (Buffalo, New York: Media Study) 1983, p. 15

³Ibid, p. 21

⁴Stanley Marsh III owned KVII, Amarillo. He also sponsored the environmental artwork "The Cadillac Ranch," created by ANT FARM for a site on his property alongside route 66 in Amarillo, Texas.

⁵Introductory text in the videotape *The Amarillo News Tapes*.

⁶Kathy Huffman in "Long Beach Museum of Art," *AFI National Video Festival* (Catalogue), June 3-7, 1981, p. 77.

⁷International Public Television Screening Conference, Toronto, 1982, sponsored by The Rockefeller Foundation.

⁸*Awards in the Visual Arts*, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 1983.

⁹Peter Rainer, "Captain Video," in *Resolution*, edited by Patti Podesta, (Los Angeles: LACE), April 18-May 10, 1986, page 108.

These are the Rules, (which later became an element of the installation *Machinery for the Re-education of a Delinquent Dictator*) forms the basis for the final segment of *Songs of the Eighties*. A pivotal work for Hall, *Songs of the Eighties* is a metaphor for the struggle between human and technical power, and nature. Presented in five parts, the tape introduces Hall, confidently striding through the machinery of a power plant in the first song, "Fear of Falling." In this section, he appears in fragmented sequences, and is cut between the image of roses (at first healthy, and then in flames) to suggest the disintegrating connection between man and nature. "Sounds of Glass," the second song, presents his son (a musician) creating a tone capable of breaking glass. Slow motion video technology exposes the intricate beauty of the crystal as it shatters. In "Through the Room" Hall appears in various locations within a large, empty Baroque room. The only object present is a white chair. A vast expanse of landscape is then introduced, and as Hall (a phantom, perhaps) is transported between nature and the enclosed space by video, he cries out in fearful tones. The chair, like the rose in "Fear of Falling" burns to nonexistence. "Learning forward Gracefully" is a brief interlude in which the words "gracefully/faithfully" are respectfully repeated by a young woman.

As a finale to *Songs of the Eighties*, "These are the Rules" is presented in a chilling performance by Hall, who delivers ultimatums like "Stand straight and tall!" "Have a positive attitude!" and "Don't be negative!" Close-ups of his mouth as he shouts orders in a military fashion alternate with full-frame images of his fist as it smashes down on a table top, culminating the tension created throughout the tape. This work, a turning point for Hall, brings together the human emotions only briefly depicted in previous works with images and metaphors for force that predict the future of his artistic direction. *Songs of the Eighties* is a powerful "story of a man who can't escape the fix of his obsession, and burns . . . it implies the tragedy that Doug Hall reaches for—the sense that something vital has perished."⁹



E

Carrying forward the opposing theme of nature and industry, power and human frailty, the videotape *Prelude to the Tempest* responds to Hall's new dialogue with landscape images and tonal sound. The isolated human gesture is of tremendous importance in this work, and psychologically serves to protect the players¹⁰ against the forces of weather and industrial strength. In this video, the individual is placed in scenes of impending natural disasters, and yet is able to symbolically "hold ground." Hall appears several times during the work, in two different forms: as a man with strength, able to endure tremendous physical pressure; and in the form of a spirit, a force reminiscent of 'ole man weather with omnipresent power to observe and dictate both natural forces and industry. These discrete scenes contextualize the artist's concern for a kind of anxiety that exists when loss of control is imminent. *Prelude to the Tempest* is a temporal statement and, like *Songs of the Eighties*, it weaves together fragments of time as a metaphor and lyric response to romanticism. *Prelude to the Tempest* introduces human qualities of endurance and patience: strength in the presence of high technology's imminent control of individuality. It was conceived as an introduction to *Storm of Stress*,¹¹ a videotape for television that concentrates completely on turbulent weather, atmospheric conditions, and ravaged land (and the inspiration for the installation *The Terrible Uncertainty of the Thing Described*).

The videoworks of Doug Hall (collectively and individually) are statements about the human condition. They are mediated statements that represent television information and individual response to the power of the broadcast image. And, as metaphors for the decline of individualism, they form a personal pastiche that reflect this artists' contemporary vision with social and political consciousness. Hall also expresses a concern for individual dignity in the face of this overwhelming influence. But, more importantly, his artworks consistently represent these concerns in a variety of forms and images that ironically utilize video to suggest its magnitude on a larger scale. For Hall, these works comprise a search into the nature of power itself and include technology, natural force, and political structure, and they speculate on the complex contradictions artists of all disciplines face in today's post-modern society.