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INTERVIEW WITH
DOUG HALL
BY SARA MACDONALD

Doug Hall's resume extends into the early 70's when he participated in the collaborative efforts of Ant Farm. With this group he realized a piece called The Eternal Frame, where Hall played the part of President Kennedy in a re-enactment of the JFK assassination in Dallas. He has exhibited his work consistently over the past twenty years using different methods and media, to provoke a reaction to what he calls the mediated world. He currently lives and works in San Francisco. We started by talking about landscape: Japanese gardens versus Western ideas of landscape.



DOUG HALL Japanese gardens are carefully constructed, you always know where you are supposed to be in relation to your world. Where we live, it's the opposite, you don't really know where you're supposed to be. There's never that kind of focal point. Which I find liberating, I guess. It's psychedelic, you know what I mean?

It's scary because there are no bounds but it's also a kind of freedom. Well, I don't know if it exists as freedom or if it implies a kind of freedom. It probably isn't freedom at all, it's just terror.

SARA MACDONALD Or what we think of as freedom. Also, in Japan, a lot of the gardens use the mountains as the background and everything's so carefully selected you start to be suspicious of the mountains themselves and think they are manipulated also. As opposed to here, you go to the Grand Canyon and you can't do anything to that.

Right, there's also that notion, the Grand Canyon is a good example, it's been so heavily photographed and what we relate to are those photographic recollections of what a landscape might be like. In fact, when you go to the Grand Canyon, you go to certain places within it to get that particular view. So you're really having a mediated experience even as you're standing there looking at it.

Doug Hall's piece *The Terrible Uncertainty of the Thing Described* is in the permanent collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. I'm referring to the article, "Invocations of the Surge Protector," by Bill Berkson in the May 1990 *Artforum*.

After reading the article you sent on the Terrible Uncertainty of the Thing Described, I've been thinking about aspects of the sublime in that work. Do you deal with the sublime in other works as well?

Not at all, my work is much more about the media and experiences of the world through media. What 's sublime in TUTD and what's terrifying isn't nature at all, but is the media, it's the mediation of your experience. The confusion about the piece, some people think I'm some sort of Wagnerian romantic and in fact, I may or may not be, but the piece really isn't about that, it's about the terror of mediation.

Remembering some of the scenes on the screen, it was rather terrible to be watching this video of a fire—and be removed from it. It wasn't the image itself but the fact of watching it.

It is also the physicality of the place. In that piece I thought about some aspects of landscape painting. One of the things that exists in landscape painting is the tradition of the viewer— established by putting you in relation to the landscape so that you can identify where you're standing or placing another viewer in the painting with whom you can identify. So you have a means of access into the landscape. My piece tries to do the opposite— it doesn't tell you where to be in the space. So you have a physical disconnection not only as a metaphor for emotional disconnection but also a situation in which you become disconnected from an experience. It's a physical break with your surroundings.

I'm interested in the kind of sculptural experience, as are a lot of my generation, which takes you out of the comfortable modernist experience of relationship with sculpture. Traditionally modernist sculpture is very much about positioning you in relation to what you are looking at.

The viewer cannot be lost in looking at the piece but must react to it?

It functions at the level of reverie. There is a level of ecstasy in the piece but with ecstasy one also has an amount of discomfort; you don't know what you are terrified of and you don't know where to position yourself—where you are supposed to be in relation to what you are experiencing. It's an experience of anxiety, not unlike being in a shopping mall.

Is ecstasy or reverie an important part of your work?

I think my more successful work has that aspect to it... yeah, my work tends to be emotional in that way. Creating an emotional response to it but at the same time there are certain mechanisms in the work which make you aware of the emotion in the experience so it's almost theatricalized, played back at you, it's almost like feedback.

That makes me think of what Benjamin said in "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in that distraction can make people more critical.

I think that's true, especially with the media war right now—it's a great example of some of the more insidious and interesting examples of mediation where it takes you to a point of total abstraction—you have an emotional response to it but it's hyper-emotional; hyper-real, but not grounded in real experience, so it takes on a language separate from the real event.

One of the things artists working with the media can do, and should be interested in doing, is revealing those mechanisms and putting a person into a situation which is alienating, and by being alienated that person becomes aware; by becoming aware they stop being passive and start functioning at the level of critique. That isn't to say the work is about theory, it's not, but it is about a non-passive relationship to viewing the world.

In thinking about your work in the 70's; it seemed to be more in the form of public demonstrations: Media Burn, Eternal Frame, etc. Currently, your work is confined to galleries.

Several things are going on: one is the time, the age I was when those pieces were done; the other is that I don't believe in public art very much. I'll tell you why: I have weird ideas. I don't feel I want to impose my weird ideas on everybody who goes by. I'm comfortable with the idea that they're in a space where people have a free choice to view or not; to remove me from a pedagogical position or laying out the way the world is supposed to be because I don't have a clue about those things.

The question comes up because of the medium you work in.



FROM PEOPLE IN BUILDINGS. 1990.
[LEFT] FROM THE TERRIBLE UNCER-
TAINTY OF THE THING DESCRIBED,
1987.

It's a populist medium.

A recent video installation is *People in Buildings*, which was installed at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and which Hall hopes to bring to the Shoshanna Wayne Gallery in Santa Monica in the fall.

I had a negative critiqueMargaret Morse, editor of a book on video coming out in the spring, says that the experience of the installation is what she calls the space in between: disconnected, physically aware and by becoming physically aware—psychologically discomforted. She felt physical discomfort didn't exist in *People in Buildings*. It was not the intent of the piece to do that- it was very much about the organization of space. A different kind of disorientation; architectural disorientation. *The Terrible Uncertainty of the Thing Described* is very heroic, very Wagnerian. I didn't want that to become my schtick. *People in Buildings* is a piece about the mundane: standing in line, going to the DMV; it's a piece built up of taped sequences done surreptitiously. With my camera over my shoulder I went into public and semi-public spaces, trying to find personal experience in public space. I'm not sure I ever actually did locate it. I'm not sure it can exist. It's very sad. People see it and get very depressed. It's unrelenting.

It was filmed in shopping malls, hospitals, courtrooms, DMV waiting rooms. It's about waiting. With *The Terrible Uncertainty of the Thing Described* I spent a year and 1/2 chasing storms. This is the human equivalent: I spent hours in the DMV observing, taping.

You found no private experiences?

There are moments; what is poignant about the tape is all these people in these places having their thoughts. I could never find them; I could find the surface of them but as I looked deeper all I could find was the surface of the image. That's a pessimistic view; I think it's possible to see beyond the surface. Now I'm applying for a grant to rework the videotape, not the installation. I'm interested in going beyond the surface, talking to people, exploring what people are thinking, getting through there, getting in there.

(technology)

I don't consider myself a techno-artist. I'm more interested in technology's relationship to the information environment and how it influences the world and the way we perceive ourselves in the world. I'm interested in people's need to amass information and to have the ability to access information. Access to computers creates the image that one has control over the information one is receiving and therefore personal control in one's life. But this is one of the deceits of technology, particularly how it's applied by artists - for example, in interactive environments. You as an observer may initiate some scenarios which are allowed by the program. It pretends to be democratic, pretends to include the viewer as a participant but really the scenario is being controlled by technology, by the programmer. It creates the illusion of control and recalls Baudrillard's notions of hyper-realism. These are things people thought about 20 years ago- nothing really new.

The Eternal Frame which re-enacts the Kennedy assassination is really an examination of what that image is—what that image represents, how it is created, how does it function and how does it function in relation to the actual event. All those things have to do with technology, or information technology.

Nineteenth century technology is really an extension of the body- it does physical things; a crane is really a big hand lifting something up. The technology of the computer is truly sublime. It's subliminal. You don't see it. It's not particularly beautiful to look at and it's very hard for it to be the source of poetic reverie *a la* Ruskin and other 19th century writers about technology. *People in Buildings* has a lot of references to the information environment; images of people processing information on keyboards.

It's also much more insidious that way—you don't know who has it, it's not so obvious where the power is.

It is much more controlling than any kind of physical control. War is an amazing example of computer technology. Just frightening. The army uses hand-held computers to locate targets in the desert.

(...)

...you've been doing this for a long time. Do you feel optimistic?

I've never felt optimistic - you mean that everything is going to turn out okay in the end?

Well, in the last 10 years things have gotten so much worse; so much more solidified about who you are and what you can do and I guess the optimism I'm wondering about is whether that can be affected at all.

I think utopianism, which is what you are talking about, 60's utopianism has been pretty much squashed. It's out the window. I'm not so sure it's bad But that sense of ecstasy that my generation felt, of "Up against the wall motherfucker!"—well, it was powerful but as a cultural critique it was a little bit off base. I don't have that kind of optimism. One of the things artists do is objectify the world and deal with it as a set of problems, a set of observations which don't suggest a... I'm not a pedagogue. I don't know the answer and don't pretend to. My work is engaged in the process of coming to terms with my position in the world.

As soon as a moral agenda is attached, a whole other set of problems is brought in. In something like architecture it's probably unsolvable. If the perfect humanist endeavor is to build a building everyone's happy in—that's an impossible endeavor. The best artists are those who able to conceptualize a process and work through that process and do it with enough humor and humility. ...You just go ahead and do what you do. ...I like terrible buildings, I like shopping malls. They're fascinating. They're like television.