

from *Doug Hall: The Spectacle of Image*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, 1987

**DOUG HALL:
THE SPECTACLE OF IMAGE**

by Bob Riley

There is "smooth talk" and angry talk on the streets which permeates all communities—including the visual arts. Disembodied voices and sound fragments from radio and TV surround us in relentless rhetoric. These broadcast productions "push" ideology as well as goods through the use of exuberant and memorable images, both visible and audible. Doug Hall's work reflects the aural and intellectual assault that defines life under these conditions. Hall's exhibition, *The Spectacle of Image*, examines symbols of authoritarian power in media and design, nature and industry. The artist engages "the spectacle" in order to reveal various ways in which society is shaped by media and how these methods and values can be contextualized and expressed as art. The idea of the spectacle has been theorized in several ways in the 20th century including Situationist Guy Debord's manifesto *The Society of the Spectacle* which argues that the commodity—and its various representations—has invaded every aspect of daily life.

Hall's early videotapes and installations (1973-1983) constitute a congruent study of 'The Theory of The Spectacle.' The spectacle affirms, at whatever cost, cultural values through all the visual and sensory means available to it: architecture, art, pageantry, industrial design, athletics, mass media, etc. According to Hall's theory of spectacle these forms combine to indirectly create cultural attitudes.¹ The artist was attracted to video and performance art as relevant forms through which he could explore the notion of spectacle in an aesthetic framework. Blending social concerns with art, Hall conceived of his work not to seek social change, but to develop an aesthetic that exploits the circularity of media forms and imagery which characterize contemporary culture and industry.

This exhibition includes two video and mechanical installations, *The Machinery for the Re-education of a Delinquent Dictator* (1983-87) and *The Terrible Uncertainty of the Thing Described* (1987); two sculptures: *The Arrogance of Power* (1987) and *The Abuse of History* (1987); sixteen "newspaper drawings" made from the front-pages of regional newspapers that the artist has collected since 1980; and a screening of six single-channel videotapes. As manifest in these works, Hall has moved from parody and analysis of news and media conventions, to performance-based or mechanical installations, and more recently works which investigate transformative forces in nature.

Hall's analysis and abstraction of electronic media began with satirical projects that were sometimes considered offensive—in "bad taste." The televised expressions of political ambition and elaborate electronic campaign coverage have become the nation's most familiar programming, and are among Hall's most favored subjects. The television public has watched political careers form, and subsequently has seen them triumph or fail. They have found formulaic televised candidate debates sensationalized like a televised game show; and viewers experienced the shock of Presidential assassinations in the mediated manner of a daytime melodrama.

The 1963 assassination of JFK and subsequent saturation media coverage was the first of its kind in world history. Subjected to unprecedented and nearly obscene media magnification, the assassination was nevertheless abstracted and made distant from a genuine experience of grief. Its coverage is the subject of *The Eternal Frame* (1973) a videotape made by two artist collectives, Ant Farm and T.R. Uthco, of which Doug Hall was a founding member.² Round-the-clock news coverage of the assassination and funeral proved the power of television to create a spectacle from tragedy.

¹Doug Hall, *Awards for the Visual Arts 2*, (statement), exhibition catalogue (Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, and The Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 1983) p. 34

²Refer to Kathy Huffman, *Videoworks by Doug Hall*, in this publication.

In times of public crisis—such as Kennedy's assassination; or celebration—such as the Super Bowl; people are united in a simultaneous perception of a message which extends through many public communication forms such as newspaper headlines, TV news, magazine covers, flags at half-mast, reversed, or upside down. These coexistent levels of information describing the same event create a vision of shared reality that took on aesthetic and physical dimensions for Hall. *The Eternal Frame* makes reference in its title to the archival film "frame" which TV viewers saw repeatedly of the assassination and the "Eternal Flame" which marks the Kennedy tomb. Hall and his associates made symbolic both the incident and image and recreated the moment—the image recorded on film—as a media performance. *The Eternal Frame* was an influential and significant project for Hall as it introduced the themes of the abstraction and misuse of media power which he continues to pursue.

In this tape, Hall and colleagues rupture the assassination spectacle by making it amusing, personalized, and obscene instead of mock mournful, abstracted and distant. His subsequent videotapes and performances continue to present the viewer with a mechanism for realizing that in the electronic media form is content. Hall perceives media as a part of the machinery of spectacle, a paradoxical theatre that is both seductive and frighteningly convincing. Hall fears the role of the individual has been so diminished in the advance of the technology and power of the spectacle that most people feel powerless and unable to effect even a cogent analysis of its influence.

Hall's consideration of the individual is evident in the installations in *The Spectacle of Image*. One's presence within the sculpture completes the artist's illusion, forcing a dynamic relationship between the spectator and the work itself. Hall's replications of natural or political phenomena serve to place the individual in relation to a vast surrounding—whether psychological, political or natural. By inserting them into a landscape of mechanically produced images, or pictures which are made symbolic through repetition, Hall calls attention to the spectator's place in the organization of the spectacle.

The presence of politicized media in society and its many forms of persuasion are taken to intimidating excess in Hall's 2-channel installation *The Machinery for the Re-Education of a Delinquent Dictator* (1983). The installation, which contains the artist-tyrant of "These are the Rules" from Hall's videotape *Songs of the 80's*, extends the tone and force of the tape in sculptural dimensions. The stacked video monitors, which contain alternating images of the "dictator" (portrayed by Hall), a gloved fist that illusionistically slams the bottom edge of the video screen for emphasis and meter, and images of an undulating flag, flank and define a central aisle where a large red flag and industrial fan confront the viewer. Words spoken by Hall's tyrant—a series of epithets that forms a sentence—are purposefully slowed and amplified harmonically to create a "floor" for the environment. Hall's text crosses the video monitors as a means of emphasizing phrases such as "Forgotten Tyrant;" "Condemned;" "The Forbidden;" and "Fear." In this work aspects of repression and the spectacle of authority are rhythmically "performed" by conventional symbols of power.

Hall's imagery and sculptural forms are intended to suggest a symbolic level of content as well as a literal critique of power. His large-scale projects respond to the restrictions of the immediate gallery environment but consider both physical and psychological spaces related to it. Using materials such as wind and flags as metaphors for speech, Hall dramatizes the distinction between actual and fabricated events in order to assert that the apparently real is often artificial. Within his installations, the combination of sculptural elements and his strategies to disorient the viewer provoke a sense of anxiety. At the same time, humor serves to relax the spectator's apprehensions: Hall paradoxically embodies the voice of authority and the voice of dissent, simultaneously.

Before speech and alphabet man lived in acoustic space—the ear received the message. This primary sense of consciousness is the focus of Hall's most recent work. In *The Terrible Uncertainty of the Thing Described* (1987),³ Hall substitutes the architectural references, amplified voice, the waving flag, props and the text of earlier installations with images of tumultuous landscape and aggressive technology. Primal landscape and particularly its sounds are the elements of a universal language of images in contrast to Hall's earlier vocabulary drawn largely from media conventions. The signifying potential of the landscape and its sounds is formulated in a work of art that viscerally communicates a sense of trepidation and threat, viscerally.

In this work Hall implies that weather conditions echo the inner world of human consciousness as well as the external world represented by electronic media. A sculptural extension of the videotape *Storm and Stress* (1986), this installation dramatizes the physical potential of the tape's imagery. *Storm and Stress* is a fifty-minute videotape in which violent weather conditions serve as a metaphor for emotional life, social erosion and industrial practice of harnessing nature for economic reasons—to merchandise power. The hope that man can control the forces of nature is exposed in the videotape which takes its title as a literal translation to the "Sturm and Drang" the hallmark of 19th century German Romanticism. In *The Terrible Uncertainty of the Thing Described* images of contained or uncontrolled power are combined in an expression of the artist's interest in the aesthetics of the irrational, the omnipotent, and the sublime.

The relationship between threatening and violent weather, and equally spectacular forms of industry and technology, succeeds Hall's dissection of the anatomy of media forms. His perception of weather conditions as concrete forces that create havoc, bring about change, and force renewal are analogous to his longstanding attitudes toward television as a pervasive cultural product—a force so powerful it is widely perceived as "natural." The multi-image, multi-monitor configuration of the installation is designed to create an ominous, uncertain mood. To further enhance the threatening atmosphere, electrical energy (an arc of lightning) is included in the work as sensory information

alongside pictorial descriptions of natural forces to make a connection between power and the representation of power.

The structure of *The Terrible Uncertainty of the Thing Described* alludes to the powers of the mind over the body. To develop a sense of disorientation the wall and ceiling boundaries of the gallery are painted black to diminish their solidity and the room is further obfuscated through the angular placement of the video images—both projected and screened. Hall's spectrum of powerful sounds, and his three channels of split-screen imagery, create a transcendent environment perceived through an assortment of sensory data.

A steel fence forms an imposing real and metaphorical barrier between the spectator and the Tesla coil, a mechanical device that occupies the center of the installation. Functioning in ways similar to the industrial fan in *The Machinery for the Re-education of a Delinquent Dictator*, the Tesla coil is a relatively crude technology invented in the beginning of the 20th century by Nicola Tesla, a visionary, inventor and contemporary of George Westinghouse and Thomas Edison.⁴ A machine that collects and discharges electricity, the coil is both terrifying and noble. Placed adjacent to this machine, two steel chairs direct the viewer's attention away from the moving images of the turbulent landscape and arouse one's empathy for familiar objects as a place of possible security and rest, and a surrogate for the human form. The artist states that the "interconnection between the architecture and the landscape of the two domains, natural and industrial, suggest complex contradictions, conjunctions and analogies between the two. The idea of this work is not to take a moral or self-righteous position emphasizing the nature/industry dichotomy; it is, rather, to present the image and to suggest relationships between them which is historical, emotional/metaphorical and structural/formal."⁵ Interested in issues of the sublime, Hall's installation examines the conditions of awe and revelation.

³Installation title *The Terrible Uncertainty of the Thing Described* taken from Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Section IV, "The Passions, clearness and obscurity as the affect" (University of Notre Dame Press, Indiana and London, 1958-1968) p. 63.

⁴Margaret Cheney, *Tesla: Man out of Time* (Dell Publishing, New York, 1981).

⁵Doug Hall, "Thoughts on Landscapes in Nature and Industry," Patti Podesta, ed., *Resolution: A Critique of Video Art* (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, Los Angeles, 1986) pp. 36-42.

⁴Jonathan Crary, "Eclipse of the Spectacle," *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (The New Museum, New York; Godine, Boston, 1984) pp. 283-284.

⁷*Ibid.*, Doug Hall, "Thoughts on Landscapes in Nature and Industry."

Nicola Tesla was well known for his high frequency, high voltage research and experiments. Many of his inventions—which anticipated radio and today's "star wars" military research—were necessary engineering for Marconi's first trans-Atlantic radio transmission, and formed spectacular displays of electrical power. A world bound by images and information was envisioned by Tesla who, in 1901, planned for a world system of interconnected, planetary communications. Inspired by other Futurist dreams of simultaneity, he believed he could engineer a globe unified by the universal registration of time and fully traversed by flows of language, images, and money—all reduced to an undifferentiated flux of electrical energy. Tesla's achievement was to transform Edison's relatively pedestrian notion of electricity as a commodity, with his vision of electricity as immanent substance into which virtually anything could be transferred. He saw the potential for electricity to instantaneously intervene anywhere, even to literally occupy the atmosphere. Tesla's vision was a fundamental understanding of the totalizing logic of capital—and television would later emerge as a key component of the "world system" whose outline he foresaw so keenly.⁶ Addressing Tesla's vision and predictions, Hall's vision affirms the global network of electronic information systems.

Preceded by the videotapes *Songs of the 80's* (1983) and *Prelude to the Tempest* (1985) which gave form to intangible, cultural tensions, Hall's attraction to the landscape was guided by his consistent interest in strong emotional content. He felt the landscape provided him with images that were outside of the self: both externalized and expressionistic, without solipsism. This led the artist into new forms of expression, away from figurative work, towards abstraction.

Hall's video recordings of tornados, floods and fires are facsimiles which, while representing the physical reality of the disaster, also represent emotional states. Hall is sensitive to some force, often unnamable, which is objectified through video. His extravagances of display make visible the excess in the operations of power and recreate for the spectator the scale of his perception: only architecturally proportioned components can recreate parallel sensations. Hall translates ". . . how images stand for things and how the internal language of ideas and emotions are triggered by pictures of things that are external to us. I am referring to images as phenomenon: being physically close to a tornado and the means by which that actual experience translates." Seeking an expression of the sublime Hall feels that it's possible to use ". . . images as language: how the idea of the tornado as seen through the matrixed screen of the television illicit and stands for certain emotional states. I guess I'm circling back on myself when I say that violent landscapes and extreme forms of technology, on the one hand, and that political spectacle—the screaming despot and the snapping flag—on the other, rely on similar image systems and the reason they function as they do, sharing a coding and decoding method, can be found in the aesthetics of the sublime."⁷

Hall's work demonstrates that the spectator is a source of meaning. The artist's aggressive imagery and strident commands ultimately provoke a sense of resistance in the viewers making them aware of the spectacular mechanisms that surround us, and partially construct our perceptions. Like the tornado in *The Terrible Uncertainty of the Thing Described*, the persuasive imagery which now envelops society, has caught us in its whirl.

Tesla believed it would be possible to project images directly from the mind, electronically. By including this inventor's machine in his installation, Hall makes a vivid reference to this theory and implies a correlation between the video projector and the Tesla coil. The video lighting bolt and Tesla's spark-gap expose a maximum energy in two forms—electricity harnessed in the service of an image, and electricity set loose. Hall dramatizes the traffic between raw power, and its applications in the spectacle.