



Hall Monitors: '70s Video Art Pioneer Doug Hall Is Back

By **Jonathan Curiel**
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In 1975, the year *Saturday Night Live* began its run as America's premiere comedic showcase and introduced audiences to the likes of John Belushi, Dan Aykroyd, and Chevy Chase, another actor — just as funny, just as outlandish — was making a name in San Francisco for his portrayals of John F. Kennedy. JFK was dead, of course, but that was part of the joke for Doug Hall, who looked like the former president, sounded like him, and mimicked him in videos that satirized America's obsession for footage of Kennedy's assassination and addiction to mass media. Hall, then in his early 30s, was a member of arts and performance collective T.R. Uthco, an obvious riff on the lack of veracity in the corporate world.

"Who can deny that we are a nation addicted to television and the constant flow of media?" Hall's JFK figure asks in *Media Burn*, the 1975 video made at Daly City's Cow Palace,

where T.R. Uthco worked with another arts and performance collective, Ant Farm. "I ask you, my fellow Americans, haven't you ever wanted to put your foot through your television screen?"

Hall is still — metaphorically speaking, anyway — putting his foot through media screens in a bid to prod, poke, and cajole his audiences into critical thinking. A new photography exhibit at Rena Bransten Gallery, "Doug Hall: Love and Architecture," plays with the way people fetishize buildings that are linked to their lovers, while a new exhibit at the San Francisco Art Institute, "Doug Hall: The Terrible Uncertainty of the Thing Described," reintroduces Hall's 1987 dramatic video of nature's fury.

Hall as performer is missing in these exhibits — he essentially retired from on-camera mischief right before he made "The Terrible Uncertainty of the Thing Described" because, he tells *SF Weekly*, he found his role-playing taxing and almost narcissistic, despite the critical acclaim he got for his characters.



COURTESY OF RENA BRANSTEN GALLERY

"The First Chapter," 2015, by Doug Hall. C.

"Doug Hall: Love and Architecture" Through May 16 at Rena Bransten Gallery, 1639 Market St., S.F. Admission is free; 415-982-3292 or renabranstengallery.com. "Doug Hall: The Terrible Uncertainty of the Thing Described" Through June 6 at the San Francisco Art Institute's Walter and McBean Galleries, 800 Chestnut St., S.F. Admission is free; 415-749-4563 or sfai.edu.

"I became disenchanted with myself as a performer," Hall says. "I didn't think I was particularly good at it, in fact. More importantly, I found it impossible to form any critical relationship to what I was doing. I couldn't see what I was doing because I was in the middle of it. I needed to get some sort of distance from the delirium that I had found myself in as a performer. There were a lot of performances I did, either individually or as part of the collective T.R. Uthco, that were pretty out there, and put demands — emotional and psychological — on me that I couldn't sustain over a career."

What Hall did sustain was his reputation as one of America's most provocative artist-intellectuals. His bona fides are the hallmarks of long artistic success — including National Endowment for the Arts fellowships, a Guggenheim fellowship, a Fulbright, and the Gilmore D. Clarke & Michael Rapuano Rome Prize in Visual Arts from the American Academy in Rome. A graduate of Harvard College (with a bachelor's in anthropology) and the Maryland Institute College of Art's Rinehart School of Sculpture (an MFA in sculpture), Hall has the ability to take esoteric subjects, especially inspired by literature, and make them visually arresting.

"The Terrible Uncertainty of the Thing Described" takes its name from a dense philosophical tract about fear and perception written by the 18th-century English philosopher Edmund Burke. In Hall's video rendition, he splices together clips of frightening (and sometimes beautiful) weather extremities: tornadoes that sweep away fields, ocean waves that rise and fall with sudden ferocity, lightning bolts straight out of a horror film. At the San Francisco Art Institute, the video is shown in a dark gallery on seven screens — a giant one perched on an upper ledge, and six smaller TVs at top-hat level. Different screens play different versions of "The Terrible Uncertainty," and the effect is transfixing, chaotic, disturbing, rapturous — and literally magnetic, thanks to a Tesla coil that, in a nearby space, emits bolts of electricity that snap in the air between two chairs. Like some Frankenstein-ian experiment, the bolts coalesce into a cloud of blue tangles, and make the sound of a lightning bolt. You don't want to go near those tangles. In fact, you can't — you're prevented by a metal screen that somehow accentuates the gallery's intense atmosphere. This agitating set-up puts the observer in the role of participant and even, Hall says, of performer.

"The piece is very much putting the burden of performance back into the hands of the audience," Hall says. "As an observer of that work, it's quite perplexing and demanding — you don't know where to be in it. It doesn't lay itself out in a kind of perspectival way. You find yourself being the performer within the installation. In that sense, I'm really happy to relinquish that responsibility."

Co-presented at the San Francisco Art Institute by SFMOMA, which owns the video, "The Terrible Uncertainty of the Thing Described" is being exhibited for the first time in the Bay Area since 1989, when the museum last put it up. The work complements Hall's JFK videos by critiquing the way moving images magnify and distort reality. The Tesla coil, which engineer Nikola Tesla invented in 1891, is really there in San Francisco Art Institute's exhibit hall, while nature's fury is merely on video.

"There's a long history of my work investigating representations of power, and how media images function within that," Hall says. "'The Terrible Uncertainty of the Thing Described' is all about power and the sublime, and the force of nature and the force of media."

At Rena Bransten Gallery, Hall's "Love and Architecture," which repurposes some of his previous photos, draws inspiration from two novels that Hall adores: Orhan Pamuk's *The Museum of Innocence* (2008), whose protagonist establishes a museum to display mundane objects his young lover once touched, and André Breton's *Nadja* (1928), a Surrealist diary of a French man's obsession with a young woman who's later put in a mental institution. Hall's *The First Chapter* is a clever diptych of two made-up pages — one showing the inside of an elaborate mall, one displaying a nude woman covering her genitals.

In *The Lonely Heart I*, Hall juxtaposes images of outside buildings with advice-column quandaries, like this one: "Dear Dr. Sooth: I've been living with Pam for two years. Recently, we met my ex-girl-friend, Karyn, but she was hitting on me and dropping remarks of what we used to do. I could tell Pam was jealous because after Karyn left she called her a bitch. Since then Karyn has called several times and when Pam answers the phone they scream and curse at each other. Pam has even challenged Karyn to a fight, but I don't want it to come to this. Any advice would help." Love goes awry in Pamuk's and Breton's works, just as it does in Hall's. He calls the "Love and Architecture" title of his Rena Bransten Gallery exhibit "an ironic juxtaposition" of wording.

Highlighting irony has been a lifelong theme for Hall, who is now 71. As an actor and absurdist, he was at his best in *Media Burn* and in *The Eternal Frame*, also made in 1975 with T.R. Uthco and Ant Farm. In *The Eternal Frame*, Hall and his acting cohorts re-enacted Kennedy's assassination in Dallas' Dealey Plaza, site of the killing, with Hall flailing around in an open limousine as if he's been hit with bullets. The humor is dark — very dark. The humor in his new work is much more subtle. And his new work emphasizes photography, which has replaced video as his primary art form. What links the works, says Hall: "Exploring how we formulate meaning out of images." Even as Hall gets older, that search doesn't change, whether he's in front of the camera or squarely behind it. Photography, Hall says, offers "a much more intimate look at things." You have to work more to get the meaning from Hall's newer art. But it's there — a critique of societal habits that Hall puts out in the open, even if he is nowhere to be found.