

MAKING

THE

SOCIAL

SUBLIME:

DOUG HALL'S

RECENT WORK

IN THE

PUBLIC SPHERE

Barrett Watten

Doug Hall's paired installations at the Vancouver Art Gallery—eight large photographs from *Non-Places*, a current work-in-progress, and an updated version of the two-channel video installation *People in Buildings* (1990)—initially convey an aggressive negativity in their distancing and separation of image from context by formal means. Hall's negativity, of course, takes its place in the genealogy of minimalist and site-specific sculpture, which developed a syntax of its surrounding spatial and temporal (social and historical) contexts using a rhetoric of displacement as much as any placement of sculptural elements (as in, for instance, Robert Smithson's central notions of "site" and "nonsite"). One displacement that makes Hall's work site-specific here is its being shown outside the territorial limits of the United States. In this siting of Hall's art beyond national borders, American horizons may be seen in his investigation of the purely formal aesthetics of images that insist on a direct confrontation

with social negativity—the scripted denials of authoritarian address and the consequent relegation of "subjects," i.e., people, to the cramped interstices and diffuse blindspots of deformed social discourse. There is a fantasy of power, and an acting out of its consequences in the delimited confines of art, here that takes on a particular meaning at a remove from its origins.

Hall is unambiguous about his work's mode of address. His statement for the video installation *The Plains of San Agustin* (1986–1987) reads, "This work is about Power and [in smaller type] how it is expressed, as image, through violent forms of weather and through the technologies which mimic or recreate these same phenomena." This work, and many others from the same period, shows power in natural processes from which one may assume the edifying, aesthetically coded distance of the traditional discourse of the sublime. Hall's fascination with tracking down extreme weather places him in an august lineage of observers of forms of nature that can hurt and that one cannot entirely comprehend. What motivates Hall in this endeavor, however, is not a desire to relive romantic aesthetics; rather, it is contained in the very sublimity of the word itself, *Power*—as Hall puts it an abstraction but a prop-

er name, something that can be approached as Kant did the Temple of Isis but whose utterances cannot be simply known or named. In answering *his* unanswerable questions put to Power, Hall varies his focus on the sublime from the content to the forms of his art, moving from terrors of “the thing described” to the self-undoing of the attempt to represent what cannot be represented. In its well-developed meditation on the sublime, Hall’s syntax plays tricks with the site-specificity of its form by provoking the eruption of natural phenomena such as lightning, tornadoes, and earthquakes that transcend the relevance of any context. But specific social and cultural motives are deeply implicated in Hall’s appropriation and imitation of natural sublimity as well. Placing the open wound of “Power,” either natural or man-made, at the center of his work has generated a series of productive cultural meanings in its development.

It is clear that the syntax of minimalism has preceded Hall in the use of the sublime—past masters from Robert Morris to Richard Serra to Ana Mendieta to Michael Heizer to Smithson abound—but it is not at all clear that these artists figure their relationship to the politics of the imponderable in the same way Hall does. Minimalism may be understood as caught in the moment of the “positive sublime,” the usual expressionist romantic mode of representation that, in Thomas Weiskel’s useful distinction, reveals an attempt to create “a thing per se which stands alone,” “a relative excess on the plane of the signified” that tries to embody the power of the sublime but which “suggests immanence, circularity, and a somewhat regressive resistance to alienation of all kinds.” For Weiskel, such a compensatory project expresses a fear of deprivation in which the sublime work of art is offered as restitution for loss while the source of anxiety is “either evaded or expelled (projected).” Much recent criticism of William Wordsworth’s sublime (that of Marjorie Levinson and Alan Liu, for instance) has followed in looking for an exterior source of denial toward which poetic excess stands in a symptomatic relation. In minimalist sculpture it would not be hard to find similar moments of artistic grandiloquence offered up to a source of anxiety kept outside the form of the work. So in Robert Smithson’s self-cancelling sculpture *The Eliminator*

(1964), the production of a sublime work of art, and thus the potential mastery of the sublime itself, is combined with its own formal negativity to create a self-perpetuating syntax that Smithson indicates in a text accompanying the work:

The Eliminator overloads the eye whenever the red neon flashes on, and in so doing diminishes the viewer’s memory dependencies or traces. Memory vanishes, while looking at *The Eliminator*. The viewer doesn’t know what he [sic] is looking at, because he has no surface space to fixate on: thus he becomes aware of the emptiness of his own sight or sees through his sight.



ROBERT SMITHSON THE ELIMINATOR 1964

steel, mirror and neon

pages 90–91:

DOUG HALL

NON-PLACE: CALIFORNIA

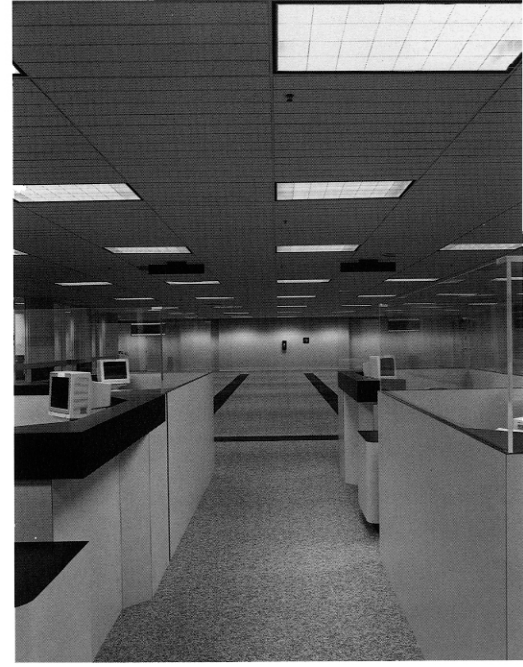
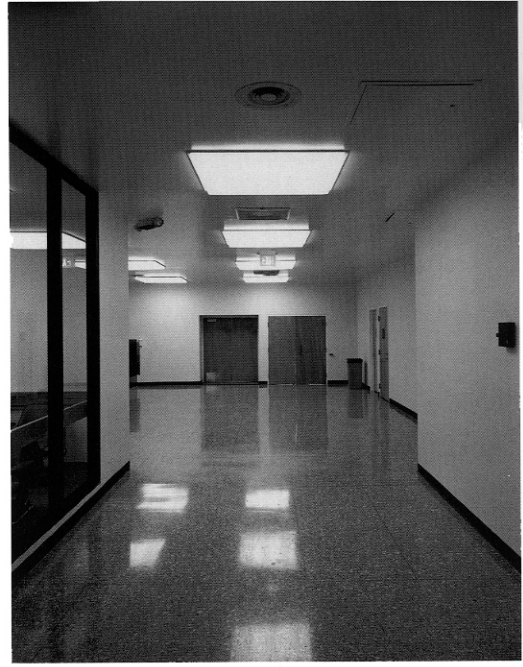
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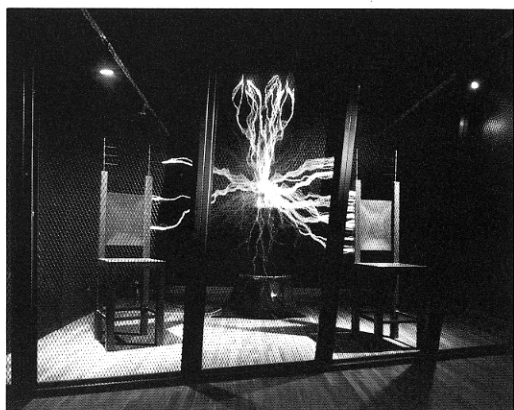
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In *The Eliminator* Smithson has constructed a machine to imitate the sublime in which “unreality becomes actual and solid”—it actually creates the effect of its own denial. The viewer’s memory traces are erased in perceiving it, just as one could not perceive the entirety of a threat to one’s understanding or physical integrity when confronted by the natural sublime (e.g., the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake). Even though *The Eliminator* presents itself as overload, its sublimity equally occurs in its self-cancelling—it is a form whose limits cannot be determined not because it has none but because it undoes them itself. For Weiskel, this “negative sublime,” a presentation of an immensity that cannot be comprehended in the form of an absence, is more generative



THE TERRIBLE UNCERTAINTY OF THE THING DESCRIBED

(Detail of Tesla coil) 1987

three channel stereo video installation, steel mesh fence, steel chairs, Tesla coil, six monitors, and video projector. Overall dimensions 490 x 1280 x 1370 cm.

Collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

than the overdone expansiveness of the “positive sublime”: “The negative sublime, however, avoids regression; it leapfrogs, as it were, across the “primary” term of finite origins [rather than presenting itself as a version of a originary mythology], which thus turns out to be an intermediate

term.” The negative sublime provides for a withheld notion of originality as it enables a production of new meaning that does not reinvest the Oedipal romance.

The central moment in Hall’s meditation on and enactment of the sublime is the Tesla coil of *The Terrible Uncertainty of the Thing Described* (1987). On a more expansive and technologically complicated scale, this work reproduces the dialectic between positive and negative sublimates that Smithson proposed in *The Eliminator*. The six video monitors present “excessive” images of sublime natural occurrences—forest fires, towering waves, tornadoes, as well as massive, man-made machines. These images are all romantic surge and swell, complete with sound effects to give precisely that sense of implicated yet uninvolved distance spectators so dearly love in a shipwreck. What is viewed on the monitors—technically precise, perfectly edited, thoughtfully juxtaposed—gives a thrill of pleasure second only to participating in grand and important events such as fighting a forest fire or working the Bering Sea fleet. A reversal of art’s usual critique of alienation occurs, and one projects a desire for involvement with natural and human processes onto these distant and unavailable scenes. The Tesla coil, however, is the structural irony that undermines all such fantasies that the sublime can be imitated in a form. Where the display of monitors provides a kind of allegory of the distancing stupors of television—where continuity of image makes it possible to believe one is seeing transparently through to the thing—the eruption of static electricity from the Tesla coil at half-hour intervals removes any basis for such a fantasy.

In countering the compensatory fantasy producing the sublime, the Tesla coil provides an instance of a negative, self-cancelling moment much like Smithson’s *The Eliminator*. Hall has—at least on a first-order reading—tried to produce an eruption of material reality that critiques the comforting illusion that the video tapes can control natural disasters merely by containing them. If there is a return to romantic aesthetics in the end, it occurs with the “excess” of the Tesla coil itself as a representation rather than as a critical rupture. On the one hand, then, Hall suffers a very controllable anxiety that he can offer to the viewer in theatrical form—

this is the sentimental side of his “threatening” sublimity. On the other hand, Hall short-circuits representation to put artist and viewer in a place where they are both equally witnesses to the constructedness of either representation (the tapes) or presentation (the discharge). What results from such a displacement, in which both artist and viewer approach and draw back from the work, involves an entirely different register of contextual meaning from the transcendent agonies of the romantic sublime or the generative ironies of the minimalist sublime.

Such a deliberate construction, through the discourse of the sublime, of a space of projection (and withdrawal) for the viewer defines the central aspect of Hall’s current work—its invocation of a public space, again seen in both positive and negative aspects. While there is a politics in Hall’s earlier use of nature, it is not simply symptomatic in the way that Wordsworth’s nature is symptomatic of the denial of current political events that were clearly much more on his mind than his self-creation as poet could allow. The question returns to the capital *P* of *Power* Hall says his work is “about”—a blindspot, a place of sublime misrecognition, a thing that cannot be named but also, in the account of his work, “how it is expressed, as image . . . through the technologies which mimic or recreate these same phenomena.” It would be too much to align Hall’s construction of the sublime simply with its impossible figuring of an object named “Power,” as Slavoj Žižek would do when he moves from the Kantian sublime to Lacan’s equivalent “object raised to the level of the (impossible-real) Thing.” The ideological moment, in other words, is not the continual return to that which cannot be represented by virtue of its presentation but an attempt at an expansive symbolization that would “suture an original cleft” made by the sublime encounter.

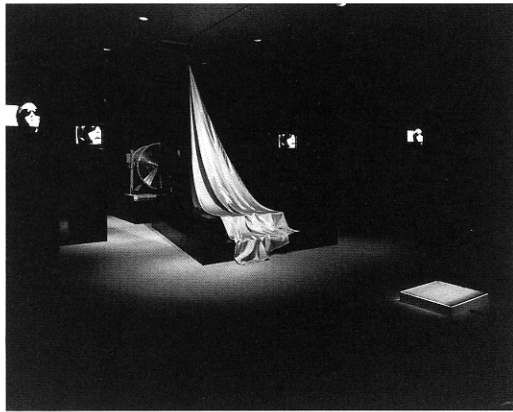
It is not just going up to the tornado and asking it its name that reveals the importance of Hall’s technological extension of the sublime image; it is the extension of that event (if it ever occurred) in the process of its spatial and temporal reproduction. If the thing that cannot be expressed can be understood to be reproducible in a technology, it may be imagined to be expressed wherever such a technology operates—

implying a very capacious space in which power is being replicated, imaged, and made to work even if it cannot be known directly, especially in technologies such as site-specific sculpture or television. Such a space of inexpressible power would, for instance, be the real-time one in which viewers of *The Terrible Uncertainty* approached and withdrew from the sublime in the absence of any ability to identify with it (with the exception of being able to identify with the sentimentalism of a destructive spectacle). In moving from an image repertoire of natural processes, excluding knowledge, to man-made environments that begin with questions of knowledge and use, Hall has redefined the kind of power he has been addressing all along. Only now, the sublime negativity formerly shifted onto nature as inexpressible reality (the artist cannot, after all, take credit for the “terrible uncertainty” of his knowledge of the Tesla coil’s spark) must be admitted to be a part of the constructed world, fully in line with human motives.

Hall has described such an intersubjective space in Foucauldian terms, and it is clear that a Benthamite empiricism, in both its panoptical and visceral aspects, is close to the center of his fascination with sublime imponderability. The position of authority in such a view is evaded or projected (or both), exactly in Weiskel’s sense of the positive sublime as “displacing its excess of signified into a dimension of contiguity which may be spatial or temporal,” leading to the useless formulation “Power is everywhere.” If one were to follow the discourse of the negative sublime, however, one would look for a suspension of authority in self-cancelling forms of representation. The rigidity of image repertoire in Hall’s recent photographic series thus seems to be doubly motivated—the photographs’ hyper-formalization, mathematical symmetry, and nearly complete absence of humanizing detail invoke a kind of sublimity of the “built world” that can be presented but not understood—in the same sense that sublime nature can be. At the same time, the restriction of content and their virtual parody of point of view make a space in their real-time presentation that locates the position of authority in the intersubjective space of viewing and apart from any embodiment in the represented work. While

the positive sublime thus puts one in the position of a “full” observer of a fantasy of sublime nature (or culture), the negative sublime leaves the space of observation open, to be filled in later. One may, if one wishes, fill in such a space of observation in a Foucauldian manner, or one could imagine the location of authority in the public, constructed, intersubjective world being addressed in the difficult process of trying to adduce a “social sublime.” If there were such a thing as a social sublime, how would we know what it is like?

In his recent series of photographic works, Hall tries to tell us exactly what a social sublime is like. Unlike most of the artwork that attempted a social critique through the 1980s and the early 1990s, Hall’s work does



MACHINERY FOR THE RE-EDUCATION OF A DELINQUENT DICTATOR 1983

two channel video installation on four monitors with flag and wind machine.

Overall dimensions 490 x 550 x 760 cm.

The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1984

not involve any reference to the economic as a series of undermining displacements of cultural verities; nor does it place the commodity form at the center of its desirous negativity. Nor, in these works, are there references to “the state”—in either symbolic form, as Hall offers with the red

flag of his earlier *Machinery for the Re-Education of a Delinquent Dictator* (1984), or in terms of overtly political references, such as those that barely manage to survive the overpainting of his newspaper series (1980–87). The space of these works is very close to that described by Jürgen Habermas as the “public sphere,” which emerged in a protracted negotiation between economic and state forms in Western societies, culminating in a period of optimal rationality and debate at about the beginning of the nineteenth century. Since then, apparently, the public sphere has declined as a forum for critical discussion that mediates between the political and economic; instead, it survives in idealized form as the assumption of disinterested and reasonable discourse that gives democratic forms of government their abiding legitimacy and final authority. While Habermas’s use of the public sphere is close to entirely heuristic, Hall’s critical images of the public sphere present difficulties for any presumption of social rationality. We see this in *Non-Places, UNIVERSITY* (1993; commissioned for a state university), *The GDR Project* (a work-in-progress based in part on the archives of the defunct state and his own photographs), and in *People in Buildings*.

To begin with, Hall’s images present the public sphere as a sublime space (in both positive and negative versions). Any engagement with the public sphere, in the form of reasoned dialogue proposed by Habermas, must involve at least addressing an interlocutor. This interlocutor cannot be known either because it is too large and threatening, and hence cannot be engaged with on equal terms; or because it is fragmentary, elliptical, or beyond comprehension, and in which case must be invented in a form of projection. Habermas would respond that such deformities are the inevitable consequences of any attempt to mix aesthetics with an engagement with public space. Hall’s images, however, demand an immediate recognition as fantasmatic forms of a public sphere that implies incommensurability rather than rationality as the condition of being in public. While considerations of mass subjectivity opposed to Habermas’s have asked for greater importance to be given to the circulations of the economic, particularly in the forms of entertainment and advertising, Hall’s

PEOPLE IN BUILDINGS 1990–1993

two channel video projection with stereo sound



images of the public sphere avoid the commodity form (and its critique) almost entirely. (It is here that a feminist criticism of Hall's work could be made—in relation to the gender politics of his rejecting the consumer aesthetics of the public sphere in favor of a social sublime created at the unknowable margins of state authority.)

So what does this social sublime look like—if not the orgasmic immediacy of a Tesla coil? In *UNIVERSITY*, it looks like a constructed environment of considerable spatial depth whose effect is to prohibit any identification or entry. The empty laboratories, classrooms, hallways, and computer rooms Hall depicts have about as much relation to the real University of California at Berkeley as did Ansel Adams's paeans to authority



UNIVERSITY 1993

videotape, black and white photographs, and text panels

University Art Museum, Berkeley 1993

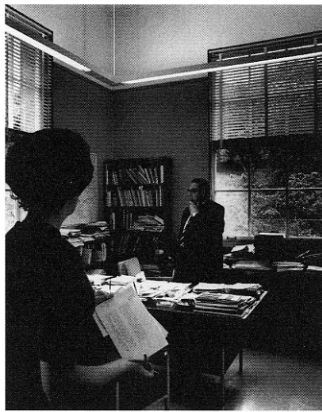
of exactly twenty-five years earlier. In that series of works, Adams depicted the university as a sequence of patriarchal figures parading their inventions, offices, football squads, and pipe organs past the admiring public gaze. Adams saw his positive presence as creative artist everywhere as a

progressive agenda; Hall sees his absence everywhere as the ideological defile that would obstruct any such thing as a progressive agenda. Where a university is concerned, this is a major critique—it means that for the public sphere, the university's major social role is as a moment of exclusion, a moment where a mass subject cannot find an image of itself and therefore must go away with the nothing Hall depicts in his images. The stakes for critical reason are devastating: between public institution and mass public there is only antagonism. What saves Hall's project from complete nihilism, however, is what it demands by virtue of the negative sublime. In not offering the plenitude of debatable authority, as do Adams's images, Hall reserves an ultimate authority to be predicated on what cannot be known through his images. This is an example of an aesthetic debate in the public sphere, *contra* Habermas, with important ideological consequences—even if the interlocutors are not assured of each other's existence, much less rationality.

In *The GDR Project*, Hall continues his portrayal of the sublime details of state authority in relation to the public sphere. Two aspects of this series seem important: the relation of the aesthetics of large public buildings, with their aura of simultaneous repression and irrationality; and the close-up and computer-distorted images of various real individuals caught up in one state-sponsored event or another and not liking it very much. What we see in these individuals' faces is the opposite of the stabilizing illusions of commodity culture; these are not simply "real" as opposed to "illusory" expressions, but ones that are defeated at the moment that they attempt to know themselves in relation to the social forms they are in. Hall's notion of the social sublime has two aspects here—that which is presented by the "large" forms of the state cannot find a rational architectural principle; subjects in the public sphere are organized precisely in relation to that which is "unknowable" in society.

One wonders what the politics of such a presentation of the public could, in the end, be—since so little space is left for positive forms of identification in the worlds Hall presents. However, siting some of Hall's earlier work with these images, and factoring in some offhand political

observations as well as some recent history, a more dimensional politics to fill in emerges. First and foremost, Hall's abiding concern in his public work has been to avoid determining personal identity by the deformities of media representation, which can, in very literal ways, hurt. This can be seen in the inaugural work of his *oeuvre*, *The Eternal Frame*, a 1975 restaging of the Kennedy assassination in Dallas by the conceptual art group T. R. Uthco. In this restaging Hall played Kennedy; in later video works, Hall is the "artist president" who spouts meta-gibberish as public discourse in a kind of nightmare of what it would mean for the aesthetic impulse to realize itself as a form of politics. It is clearly Hall's primary concern that false representations be given the form of idealizations in



ANSEL ADAMS

DR. JOSEPH D. LOHMAN IN OFFICE

APRIL 1967

Contemporary print from original negative by Ansel Adams,

California Museum of Photography, Sweeny/Rubin Ansel

Adams *Fiat Lux* Collection, University of California, Riverside.

terms of whose inadequacy (the negative sublime) the subject may idealize itself. The constant barrage of negative imagery in Hall's work does not simply ironize its mode of expression (a form of sentimental bathos vis à vis the positive sublime). There is something other than the fountain

of youth that continually sets up false gods to be overcome that is important for politics here.

One begins to see in higher relief some of what Hall wants politically in a recent interview. At one point, he laments some rather typical inefficiencies of the late-Soviet bureaucracy in terms that seem to want an authority to take charge even when there has been a celebrated absence of one:

Tatyana, the official organizer of the conference, would consistently respond to our equipment requests with one of two phrases: response number one was "It is impossible," and response number two was "It is not a problem." Both meant that we were not going to get the equipment that we had requested.

This narrative bears an eerie resemblance to the self-cancelling moment Smithson scripted for *The Eliminator*—although here the ideological work of social sublimity does not need to be embodied in an ironic artwork; it exists in the (Soviet) public sphere independently. What is important is how easily this moment of doubleness locates the question of authority for Hall. Later, in a Third World rather than a Second World context, Hall encounters a similar moment where no one is in charge of the public sphere in the deformed media sex and violence of a Brazilian working-class tabloid. Using images taken from the tabloid, he stages a site-specific art exhibition in São Paulo that he hopes will eventually get his picture in the tabloid itself, since the themes of his show are "sex" and "violence." As a result, Hall can find an image of himself in the place where the absent interlocutor of the public sphere might be. In both cases there is a reasonable demand for an authority to mediate either "high" state forms (notable for their absence) or the vagaries of "low" social forms (known by their unseemly presence). The social sublime in both versions is predicated on the impossibility of ever knowing it.

Hall's current video installation *People in Buildings* is his most complex realization of the sublime dynamics of the public sphere to date. The

work both summarizes a number of the themes of Hall's prior work and breaks new ground in the strictly controlled register of his image material. Central to the work is the construction of a public sphere between two registers of image, much like the two image repertoires of *The GDR Project*—an "exterior" video tape of the facades of numerous corporate and state buildings and an "interior" video tape of portraits of individuals caught in moments of (non)reflection in the public sphere. The "exterior" sequence often depicts architecture of fairly recent construction—post-modern galleries as well as fountains and escalators to move things along (what looked like "progress" to 1980s San Francisco), but there are also more neutral public spaces of earlier date, along with superimpositions of "sublime" imagery from Hall's previous work (weather, water running, fire, flags unfurling outside a public building). The scary architectural wraiths of Philip Johnson's office tower at 580 California Street, with their neoclassical fantasy of "life in death," are central figures of immutability and absence, while various techniques of video "windowing" and the use of decorative static patterns provide a lyrical counterpoint to architectural immensity.

The corresponding "interiors" of the public sphere are more unstable, multiple, diverse—caught not in a monolithic vise grip of immensity to betray their puny publicness, but variously configured around mobile and errant gazes (of the video camera) that create conflicting scenarios and choices. Where Hall begins his documentation of public individuals with something like a Foucauldian gaze that would render differences equivalent in an exercise of purely formal power, he finds himself in a much more complicitous, celebratory, and even subjective mode of address in his "interior" sequence. The Foucauldian fetishization of power gives way to the pleasures of another kind of surveillance, one more akin to the fantastic imaging technology of *Blade Runner* ("move in / cut left / rotate 90° / back off / cut / print"). In the second lengthy sequence, for instance, the "target" of Hall's gaze is a person waiting in a bus station who tries to preserve his autonomy while a routine police search of an "undesirable" is going on several feet away from him. Windowed on

video, the man's expressions are brought out of context and focused on until it is evident that, as for various individuals similarly caught in *The GDR Project*, being in the public sphere means being unable to comprehend one's context. Later, Hall juxtaposes a sequence of men reading porno magazines in a bookstore with one of library patrons flipping through gardening manuals with similar motions. Where all the petit-bourgeois objectification of the Foucauldian paradigm is operative in the first series (leading to the question of a "violation" of privacy rights when the face of one porno patron is seen), objectification yields to lyricism in the second sequence and a series of quite poignant identificatory moments results. The condition of looking at and for information in an oversized but underfunded library becomes a reality of the public sphere, but there is a pleasure in this moment of loss that Hall immediately recognizes and ironically "covers" with theme music from Erik Satie.

While he is uncomfortable giving up the *faux*-domination the social sublime offers, clearly Hall is beginning to see other, less rigidly coded, possibilities for his image repertoire—particularly in full-screen close-ups centering around the eyes of women watching sequences of numbers on computer screens that becomes the stabilizing motif of the video. Here women are seen as engaged in social processes, in public, that are not simply objectifying. The rather meager offerings of a fashion boutique thrown in at the end of the tape shows Hall's continuing refusal to engage the commodity critique in anything other than dismissive terms, even as he has begun to develop images of women in public apart from that discourse. The real political development in *People in Buildings* is thus not the static verification of the social sublime but a new space of possibility. Here, Hall begins to approach that other essayist of the social sublime, Jean-Luc Godard, whose *Numero Deux* divides the authority of the gaze into two disjunct technologies—video and film—and offers a play of possibility in between. A similar moment of dismantling the objectifying gaze is occurring between the two tapes of *People in Buildings*, and it appears to be easier than Hall would have thought.

Hall's recent work in the public sphere has an additional political

PEOPLE IN BUILDINGS 1990–1993

two channel video projection with stereo sound



resonance in its having been undertaken after his encounters with the Second and Third Worlds discussed above. Even though they are resolutely First World works, and even though they are so centrally configured around the formal imitation of domination and power, it is important that Hall began to turn his attention to these kinds of social imagery after the “Fall of Communism” in 1989. Clearly the giddy identification with the overturning of sclerotic authority in Eastern Europe fed Hall’s interest in the social sublime, as witness his similar treatments of public buildings from both the East and the West. But it is at this moment of undermined authority, I would argue, that a more open, less codified approach to the public sphere became available for Hall. Before the Fall, in other words, the social sublime had been displaced into a media technology that chased after tornadoes in Oklahoma as if that were a continuation (which it was) of the representational violence and critique of the Kennedy assassination video of 1975. Fredric Jameson has discussed the epochal significance of that literal trauma in its aesthetic recuperation in postmodern video art, an argument that would have been even stronger had he been aware of Hall’s work.

The site-specificity of Hall’s installation outside the national horizons of the United States thus turns out to be an historical specificity as well. It marks as closed the epoch of trauma and recuperation that began with Kennedy and extended through the Vietnam War (a closure that coincided with such epochal events as the Fall of Communism and the Gulf War) in a new capacity to restage domination and power toward more multiple registers, seen in a world where ideology circulates in real-time social space.

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