

TRACES

a multimedia installation of the Atomic Age

Peter d'Agostino

Rosenberg Gallery • Goucher College • Baltimore, Maryland
March 13–April 28, 1995

Pacific Film Archive • University Art Museum
University of California at Berkeley
August 1995

Weatherspoon Art Gallery
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
November 5–December 31, 1995

Exhibition Curator: Helen Glazer

An Introduction to TRACES

by Helen Glazer

TRACES is a multimedia installation which marks the 50th anniversary of the beginning of the Atomic Age. Drawing from a range of American and Japanese sources, Peter d'Agostino interweaves aspects of public histories and personal memories. **TRACES**¹ is presented from his point of view as an American born "between the bombs" in 1945—that is, between the secret A-bomb test on July 16 and the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 6 and 9.

In tackling this topic, d'Agostino has set himself a formidable challenge. Fifty years later, humankind continues to grapple with the implications of these terrifying demonstrations of the bomb's power. In Hiroshima one bomb wiped out over 100,000 people, some of whom were literally vaporized into traces—shadowlike shapes scorched into the earth where they were standing (an image incorporated into the **TRACES** video). Human beings were for the first time confronted by the possibility of becoming agents of their own extinction. The recent controversy over the *Enola Gay* exhibition at the Smithsonian is but one reminder that the bombing of Hiroshima still stirs intense emotions among both Americans and the Japanese; some observers refer to American guilt and Japanese shame, not to mention abundant anger and a sense of injury on both sides. In this emotion-laden atmosphere one must proceed with care and sensitivity in order to steer clear of blame and recriminations, on one hand, or propaganda on the other. With **TRACES**, Peter d'Agostino strives instead to create a memorial to this event which functions analogously to the Viet Nam Memorial in Washington, D.C.—a public space which nonetheless allows for a personal response, where the dead are not absorbed into statistics and abstractions but are remembered as individuals.

A site-specific installation,² **TRACES** includes two video monitors which are framed by Japanese-style folding screens arranged to create a more private enclosure within the public space of the gallery. The videos are complemented by wall panels—photographic enlargements of stills from the videotapes and digitally altered fragments from the **Life** magazine cover for July 30, 1945, the day after he was born. This cover story, entitled "Playing with Shadows" shows a toddler in mid-stride, about to step on his shadow. Originally intended as an innocent, heartwarming image, in retrospect everything about it becomes ironic, including the title and the word "Life," since at that moment, the atomic bomb had been tested and preparations were underway to drop it on Japan. Here the baby is also a reference to d'Agostino and a generation of Americans. Some of these wall panel images also appear in the photo/text piece which d'Agostino created for this catalog.

Of the two videos in **TRACES**, one is a repeating loop of the annual Peace Ceremonies at Hiroshima, which d'Agostino recorded on three visits to Japan between 1991 and 1993. The Peace Ceremonies at Hiroshima begin at 8:16 a.m. every August 6 with the sounding of sirens and a "die-in"—participants lie motionless on the ground for several minutes in front of the building now known as the Atomic Dome. (While the rest of Hiroshima was rebuilt, the Atomic Dome was incorporated into a memorial park and left untouched as a reminder of the destruction.) The ceremonies continue with drumming and chanting by Buddhist monks until dusk, when glowing paper lanterns are launched downriver. Each lantern is inscribed with the name of someone who died in the blast and the donor of the lantern. There is no specified beginning or end to the experience of the **TRACES** installation, because the videos are continuously repeated. The sights and sounds of the Peace Ceremonies therefore become the central reference point against which another, longer videotape is viewed as it plays simultaneously on another monitor.

The longer tape incorporates provocative and unfamiliar images as well as some familiar historical footage in a montage that moves rapidly from J. Robert Oppenheimer expressing his regret with a quote from the **Bhagavad Gita**, to the Enola Gay, to the fiery explosion of the Hiroshima bomb and the desolate landscape and human suffering left in its wake. We hear an excerpt from a 1950s television program that utilizes what is known in the media industry as "voice of God narration"—a deep-voiced, unseen announcer intoning such phrases as, "The city dies as an age is born." **TRACES** is clearly not a television documentary where we are presented with facts and interviews and the filmmaker or videographer plays a self-effacing, reportorial role. Instead, d'Agostino has intervened and reinterpreted this footage in various ways, employing special effects, inserting other sounds and images or placing sound and image out of synch. This involves the viewer in an active process of decoding the images and making new connections rather than being a passive recipient of information.

One effect of these interventions and intercuts is to suggest a stream of consciousness. The next segment moves back and forth in time. The Peace Ceremonies bring us back to the 1990s, the contemporary Japanese landscape flashes past through train windows, we land in New York City, then jump to outtakes from home movies from the 1950s. In this segment d'Agostino is asking himself the question people often ask themselves about major historical events: where was I when that happened? Ironically, when he attempts to show us the New York apartment building where he lived on August 6, 1945, it is gone, there is only an empty lot between two other buildings.

The home movies, which d'Agostino shot as a boy and fleetingly appears in, function similarly to the wall panels of the **Life** magazine photo; they refer to the Postwar generation and stir memories of the '50s for those who were alive then. It was a period when the instability brought on by the Cold War lay

uneasily beneath the placid surface of the Postwar return to “normal life.” Even on the family outings depicted here, there are reminders of war—the so-called Mothball Fleet of retired World War II battle-ships docked along the Hudson River. A series of water images follows which tie in with other water motifs in the rest of the installation (the baby on the beach, the Hiroshima Peace Ceremonies). One moves from the Mothball Fleet to a boat touring the bay at Nagasaki, to the waters of Pearl Harbor where the camera shows us another memorial—to people who died in the Japanese surprise attack in 1941 which precipitated the United States’ entrance into World War II. The USS Arizona memorial there functions similarly to Hiroshima’s Atomic Dome—the debris remains below the water’s surface as part of the memorial. Water has a key symbolic role in both memorials. Water reminds us of tears that were shed, water cleanses, water covers over. In its ceaseless flow, it is suggestive of the passage of time, like the old proverb that one can never step into the same river twice.

The title **TRACES** was inspired by a passage titled “So,” from Roland Barthes’ book **Empire of Signs**,³ which is devoted to a discussion of the Japanese poetic form known as haiku, dramatically brief literary works containing only 17 syllables each. Barthes gives an example translated from Japanese: “The winter wind blows./The cat’s eyes/Blink.” In a statement which d’Agostino reproduces in **TRACES**, Barthes continues: “Such traces (the word suits the haiku, a faint gash inscribed upon time) establish what we have been able to call the ‘vision without commentary.’” He goes on to say that what intrigues him about haiku is the poetic impression it leaves, despite its matter-of-factness and lack of descriptive detail, and the way a haiku, by its very compression, conveys the immediacy of a fleeting impression.

TRACES is much too complex in its structure and its intentions to **be** a haiku, but d’Agostino’s choice of title suggests that he intends for some of the spirit and impact of the haiku to reside there. A bomb explodes; a mushroom cloud rises from the ground. A baby walks on a beach in 1945, casting a long shadow. A glowing paper lantern floats downstream at dusk; it tips over and goes dark.

Helen Glazer is exhibitions director at Goucher College.

1 Peter d’Agostino has specified that the title be written in upper case letters.

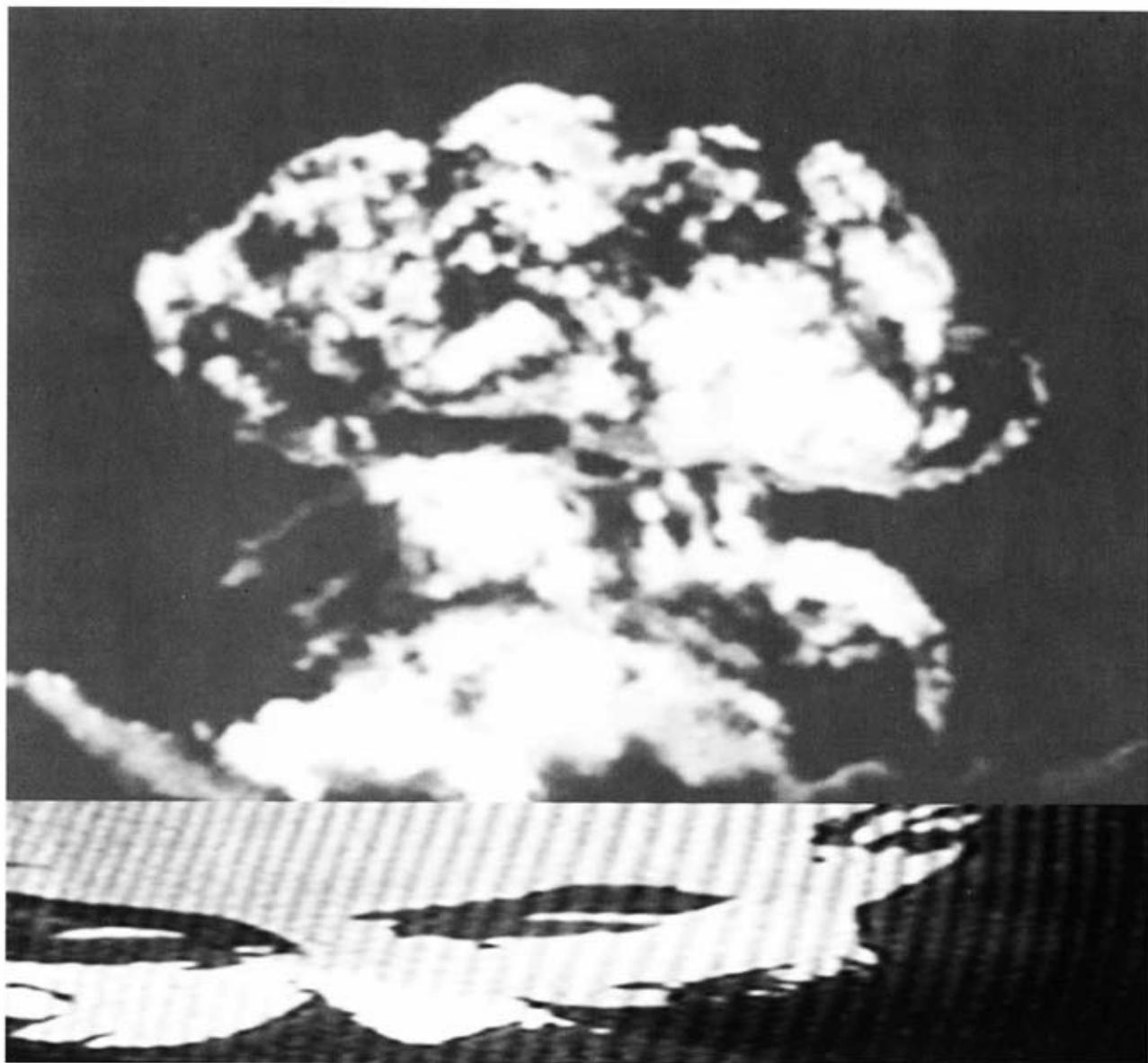
2 “Site-specific” means that the video, photographic and sculptural elements are designed specifically for the architectural environment of each gallery where it is shown. At Goucher College two repeating videotape loops play continuously. Other versions of the piece incorporate interactive digital video that can be accessed by viewers at the site, as well as an on-line version that can be accessed on the World-Wide Web via the Internet.

3 New York, Farrar Straus & Giroux: 1983, pp. 81–84.

TRACES (between the bombs)

by Peter d'Agostino



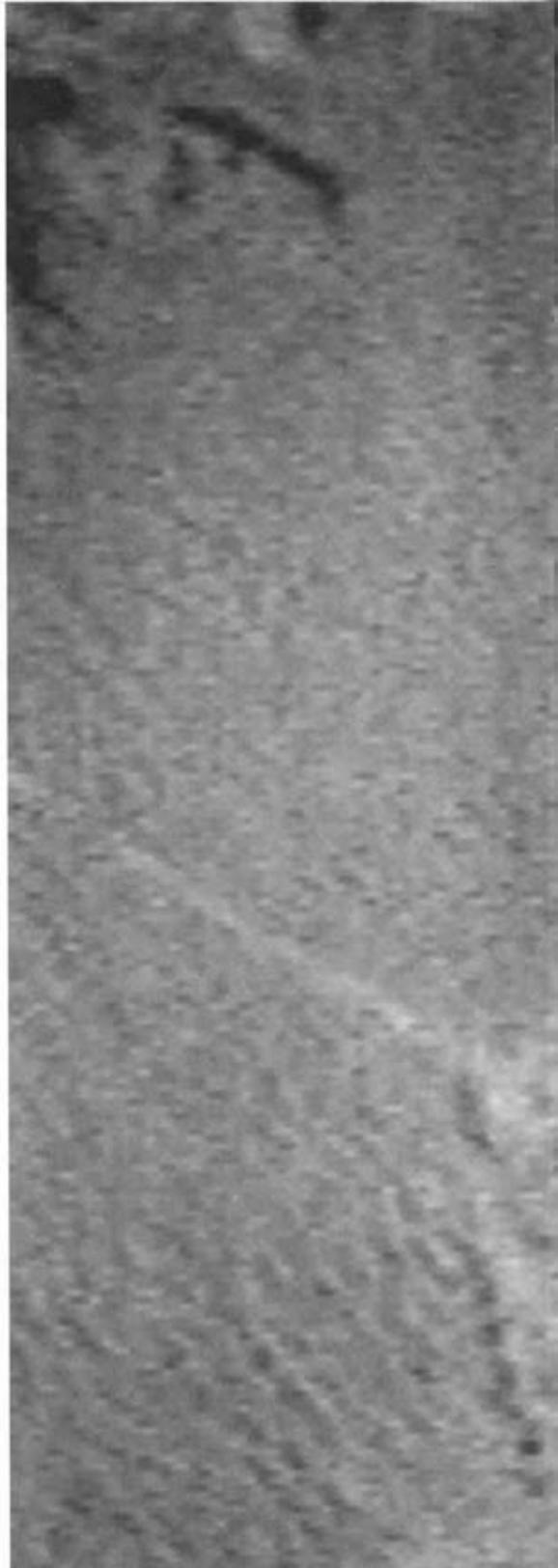


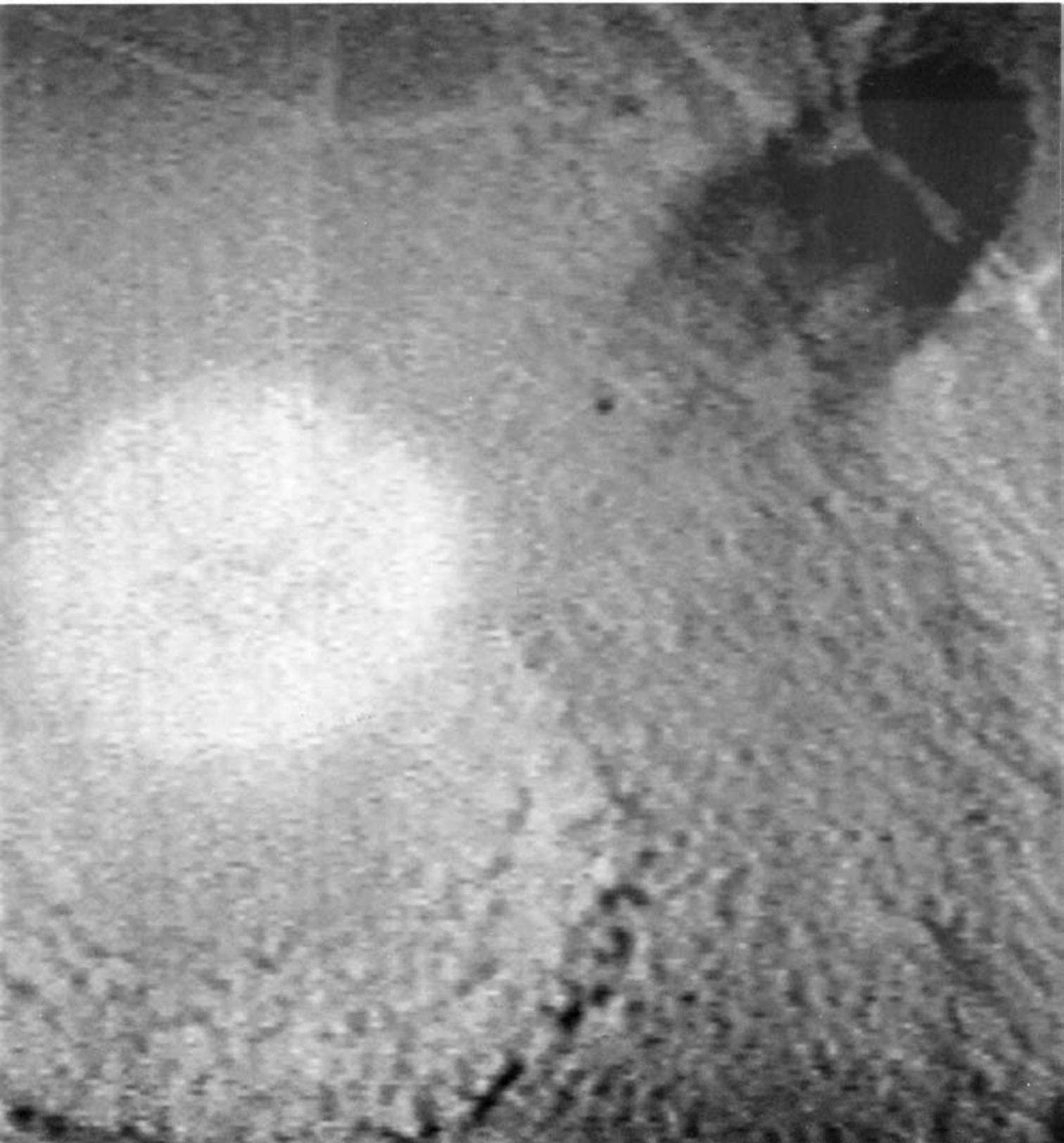
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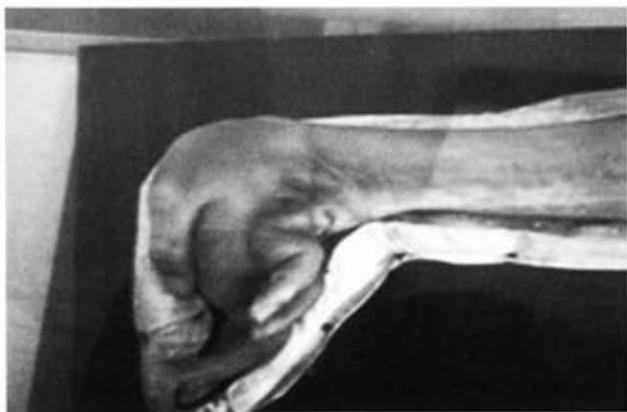
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"Never can we forget the horrible sight that assailed our eyes under Hiroshima's mushroom cloud. Nor is the problem only nuclear weapons, as massive arsenals of biological, chemical, and other weapons of mass destruction have been built up over the years to cast a dark shadow over the future of mankind."

—*T. Hiraoka, Mayor of Hiroshima*

"It's shameful that political pressure caused the Smithsonian Institution to scuttle its attempt to tell the story of the Enola Gay and America's dropping of the first atomic bomb, museum officials and historians said last week."

—*Julia M. Klein,*
Philadelphia Inquirer

"Memories fade and only official history remains."

—*Noam Chomsky*

"It is possible that the very memory of the original...will fade in the mind of future generations, but from now on there is no longer any difference: the duplication is sufficient to render both artificial."

—*Jean Baudrillard*

"We now have a topology of non-place... an 'electronic' as much as an 'atomic' war-game, in which instantaneous interface replaces face-to-face encounters of armies."

—*Paul Virilio*



Peter d'Agostino's Videoworks (in retrospect)

by Steve Seid

Since its inception a mere 30 years ago, video art has had a ticklish, somewhat queasy relationship with television. Linked to television by a common medium, video art has unwittingly inherited its pop culture status, an aesthetic contaminant that has tainted the high art aspirations of the field. This de facto inheritance has demanded that video artists implicitly address the mass culture origins of the medium, which has made for a rich art practice that can support everything from the most rarefied of theoretical examinations to the most personal of exhortations, while remaining oddly enmeshed in a pop sensibility.

Some artists have risen to the challenge of reconciling video art's mixed message, taking as their prime focus the complex impact of television. This has led to deconstructions of programming genres, parodies of celebrity, even unique performance works that explode mainstream expectations. Other artists have rallied their creative resources in an attempt to efface video's inherent connection to a mass medium. Highly formal works have emerged from these efforts, works that have a greater allegiance to art historical discourse than to the quirks of mass culture.

Between these antipodal positions lies a third orientation that embraces a multitude of aesthetic and intellectual strategies, keeping in mind both the agora¹ and the academy. One artist who has plied this rewarding path is Peter d'Agostino, whose single-channel and interactive videoworks maintain an interesting balance between the high and the low. His early major work, videotaped in black-and-white and known collectively as **The Walk Series** (1973–74), document several peripatetic journeys (along a roof, a fence and a beach) that inscribe the artist's immediate environment. Though simple in execution the tapes address a multiplicity of theoretical and personal concerns, especially conceptions of landscape, art as everyday ritual, and the complexities of temporality.

As both author and performer, d'Agostino is seen, often by shadows cast or some partial framing of his body, walking about in three triangulated locations in San Francisco. Portrait and landscape unite as the artist engages the act of being in a place: after all, video is the rare art medium that contains a temporal as well as spatial element. The two genres of depiction meld as the environment is inseparably marked by the artist's presence, an act of transversing one's territory in an almost occult manner.

Through **The Walk Series**, d'Agostino constructs a selfhood within an aesthetic and social space. But there is another equally important space addressed by this series, and that is the space of television. Popular culture as a subject and an arena of practice greatly influenced the art of the '60s. Where pop

artists such as Andy Warhol could appropriate the images of mass culture, pioneering video artists such as Nam June Paik found that they could seize the image-making tools of a medium that was fast becoming a monolithic proponent of consumer culture.

By commandeering the video medium artists implicitly acknowledged its importance as a shaper of culture. The conventions of broadcast television and other commercial applications provided raw material for an examination of the ways these images operate in the social realm. In d'Agostino's works, this examination often encompasses public architecture, sites of mass commerce and transport. The trilogy **Comings and Goings** (1977-79) focuses on urban mass transit in Paris, San Francisco and Washington, where closed-circuit surveillance cameras mediate the movement of passengers. Here, mass transit acquires the character of mass media as passengers enter a controlled and, in many ways, image-laden environment.

In the works that immediately follow **Comings and Goings**, d'Agostino emphasizes his analysis of television, while shifting spheres of social activity provide the field of investigation. **QUARKS** (1979-80) juxtaposes TV images and sounds with inconsequential tableaux, such as a squash game, to recontextualize information. The very term "quarks," coined by James Joyce to mean a trivial sum, suggests the insubstantial nature of the message. **Suburban Strategies** (1980) blends shopping malls, beaches, freeways and other gathering places of contemporary culture with visual fragments and sound-bites from television. D'Agostino edits the tape like a nervous dial spin, creating the sense that daily life is but an extension of mass media. In **TeleTapes** (1981), a compressed day's worth of TV programming skitters off of d'Agostino's own staged footage. The language of television, its effects, its tropes,² its repetition, mythologizes TV reality and its consumerist ethos, leaving workaday reality to fend for itself.

Language was to preoccupy d'Agostino as he embarked on the ambitious interactive videodisc **DOUBLE YOU (and X,Y,Z.)** (1981-86). On the surface, the videodisc explores the acquisition of language, from the first babblings to the production of sentences and songs. because this acquisitive process is structurally invisible, d'Agostino draws on another metaphorical system, physics, to provide the underlying form. Through analogy, the physical metaphors of light, gravity, strong force and weak force echo the essential stages of early language development. Often presented as a large-scale installation, **DOUBLE YOU (and X,Y,Z.)** offered the viewer an open-ended experience consisting of 52 chapters and some 48,000 frames of text and image. The videodisc encouraged the assembly of associative passages, allowing the viewer to retrieve improvised meaning. It is here that the true subject of this

pioneering work is to be found as it relinquishes some of the control over a medium that is typically non-participatory.

D'Agostino went on to expand his interests in the impact of mass media to encompass the entire history of 20th-century communications. Another interactive videodisc, **TransmissionS** (1985–90) presents modern communications technology as not simply an extension of Western culture and its history, but as a catalyst for often dubious change. Launching the videodisc with a segment on the seminal figures of the early electronic age—Edison, Tesla, Marconi—**TransmissionS** passes through a sextet of stories alternately historical and personal.

In the most elaborate installation of **TransmissionS** at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1990, d'Agostino foregrounded one particular segment titled "In the WELL," the story of a young Italian boy who had fallen into a deep shaft. The incident quickly became a national "event" with round-the-clock coverage as the tragedy dragged on. The installation, centered around a massive cylinder, offers the viewer a critique of the technology of seeing, using video projection, several embedded monitors, a voyeuristic peephole, and a touch-screen accessing the **TransmissionS** database. What we learn from all this is the ironic nature of the communications apparatus. The line coverage of the young boy's crisis continued for almost two days, yet there was nothing to see — the camera could not peer into the darkness of the well. Instead, the media substituted images—the president, the rescue attempt, the family—for the absent and ineffable death of the child. The boy disappeared by the mechanism of media, his tragedy becoming a residual artifact of the coverage.

For two decades, Peter d'Agostino has pursued a cautionary critique of mass media: turning media upon itself he has examined its historical impact in light of the human toll. As his work testifies, d'Agostino always returns to the individual voice, to his own voice, as the site from which true communication begins and ends.

Steve Seid is the Video Curator at the Pacific Film Archive, housed within the University Art Museum, University of California at Berkeley.

1 Marketplace

2 Figures of speech

Peter d'Agostino

born July 29, 1945, New York, New York
lives in Elkins Park, Pennsylvania

Peter d'Agostino is an artist who has been working in video since 1971 and in interactive hypermedia for over a decade. D'Agostino's work has been exhibited internationally in the form of installations, performances, telecommunications events and broadcast productions. He is a professor in the School of Communications and Theater, Temple University, Philadelphia.

Education

B.F.A. School of Visual Arts, New York
M.A. San Francisco State University

Awards and Honors

1993-94 Pew Fellow in the Arts
The Banff Centre for the Arts, Artist-in-Residence

1992 Japan Foundation fellow

1990 Honorary Award, Prix Ars Electronica, Linz, Austria

1989 National Endowment for the Arts (also 1974, 1977, 1979)

1983-85 Center for Advanced Visual Studies, MIT, fellow

1986 American Academy in Rome, visiting artist

1981 Television Laboratory, WNET, New York, artist-in-residence

Selected Videography and Multimedia Installations

PROJECTS: 1972-74, 30 min.
"WALL I (Einstein's Birthday)," WALL II,"
"OVERFEET, OVERHEAD" 1974

The Walk Series (1973-74) 60 min.

PLACE POEMS: "pond, pass, peak/kiva, temple, pyramid" (1974-75) 15 min.

PASSAGES (1974-76) 20 min.

Door/Bulb, Bowl, Back/Door (1976) 6 min.

Paradise Regain'd, Paradise Lost (1971-76)
15 min.

ALPHA, TRANS, CHUNG (1976-78) 41 min.
"ALPHA performed," "Trans-Europ Expressed,"
"CHUNG: 'Still' Another Meaning"

Comings and Goings (1977-79) 33 min.
"PARIS (Metro)," "San Francisco (BART),"
"Washington (METRO)"

Proposal for QUBE (1978) 10 min.

QUARKS (1979-80) 8 min.

SUBURBAN STRATEGIES (1980) 17 min.
"LA (Century City)," "Dayton MALLing"

TeleTapes (1981) 28 min.

DOUBLE YOU (and X,Y,Z) (1981-86) 27 min.,
interactive videodisc and videotape

TransmissionS (1985-90) 28 min., interactive
videodisc and videotape

TRACES (1991-95) 15 min., digital video and
videotape

VR/RV: a recreational vehicle in virtual reality
(1993-94) 11 min., virtuality project and
videotape

Video Distribution: Electronic Arts Intermix, New York

Collections (Selected)

Museum of Modern Art, New York
Donnell Library, New York
Long Beach Museum of Art
Santa Barbara Museum of Art
Kijkhuis, Holland
Palais des Beaux-Arts, Charleroi, Belgium
National Gallery of Canada
Arts Council of Great Britain
Pacific Film Archives, University Art Museum,
Berkeley, California

Individual Exhibitions (Selected)

1994 Banff Centre for the Arts, Canada
1993 Image Forum, Tokyo;
ArtSpace, Auckland, New Zealand
1989 Spectacolor Electronic Billboard, Times
Square, New York;
Student Cultural Center, Belgrade,
Yugoslavia
1988 Pacific Film Archives, University Art
Museum, Berkeley, California
1987 Philadelphia Museum of Art
1986 American Academy in Rome, Italy;
Institute of North American Studies,
Barcelona;
Houston Center for Photography
1984 Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston
1983 Franklin Furnace, New York;
Port Washington Library, New York
1982 The Kitchen Center for Video, Music and
Dance, New York

1981 Anthology Film Archives, New York;
Boston Film/Video Foundation
1980 Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art
1979 Museum of Modern Art, New York;
Long Beach Museum of Art, California;
Washington Project for the Arts, D.C.;
Contemporary Art Center, Cincinnati
1978 Artists Space, New York;
Ohio State University, Columbus
1977 San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
1976 San Francisco Art Institute;
80 Langton Street, San Francisco
1975 80 Langton Street, San Francisco;
1973 Quay Gallery, San Francisco

Group Exhibitions (Selected)

1995 "New Light: The Electronic Cinema
(American Video Art: 1965-1994), National
Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
1993 "Angles of Incidence: Video Reflections of
MultiMedia Artworks," Banff Centre for the
Arts, Canada;
Montage 93: International Festival of the
Image, Rochester, New York
1991 "Televisions: Channels for Changing TV,"
Long Beach Museum of Art, California;
"Artists Choose Artists," Institute of
Contemporary Art, Philadelphia
1990 "Construction in Process," Kino Museum,
Lodz, Poland;
"Interactions," Rijksmuseum Twenthe,
Enschede, Holland;
"Contemporary Philadelphia Artists,"
Philadelphia Museum of Art

- 1989 "The Technological Imagination: Machines in the Garden of Art," Minneapolis College of Art and Design and InterArts Gallery
- 1988 "Electronic Arts Festival," Rennes, France; "Center for Advanced Visual Studies—20th Anniversary Exhibition," MIT, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Karlsruhe, Germany
- 1987 "Surveillance," Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE); "Media Hostages," Museum of the Moving Image, New York
- 1986 "TV Generations," LACE; "Resolutions," LACE
- 1985 "Video: A Retrospective 1974–84," Long Beach Museum of Art, California
- 1984 "From Video to TV," Museum of Modern Art, Bologna
- 1983 "New Metaphors/ Six Alternatives," Sao Paulo International Biennial; "Video Art: A History," Museum of Modern Art; "Against Naturalism: Video and Tv Drama," British Film Institute; "Reading Television," Museum of Modern Art; "New American Video," Kunsthaus, Zurich; "Art Video," Palais des Beaux-Arts, Belgium
- 1982 "TV Tactics," Anthology Film Archives; "A History of Video," Portable Channel, Rochester, New York; "Text/Picture Notes," Rochester, New York
- 1981 "Biennial," Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; "Photographs and Words," San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
- 1980 "Video: Time and Space," College of Architecture, Barcelona
- 1979 "Space/Time/Sound—1970's," San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
- 1978 "Global Space," San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
- 1977 "Week of International Performance," Museum of Modern Art, Bologna; "Recent Bay Area Art," Kemein Art Gallery, Tokyo
- 1976 "Video International," Aarhus Museum of Art, Denmark
- 1975 "Information," San Francisco Art Institute

Publications by Peter d'Agostino

- P. d'Agostino, *TRANSMISSION: Theory and Practice for a New Television Aesthetics* (New York: 1985)
- , *Coming and Going* (San Francisco: 1982)
- , *TeleGuide Proposal for QUBE* (San Francisco: 1980)
- , *Alpha, Trans, Chung—Semiotics, Film, and Interpretation* (San Francisco: 1978)
- P. d'Agostino and A. Muntadas, eds., *The Un/Necessary Image* (New York: 1983)
- P. d'Agostino and D. Tafler, eds., *TRANSMISSION: Toward a Post-Television Culture* (Los Angeles: 1994)
- P. d'Agostino and L. Thomas, eds., *Still Photography, the Problematic Model* (San Francisco: 1981)

Acknowledgments

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