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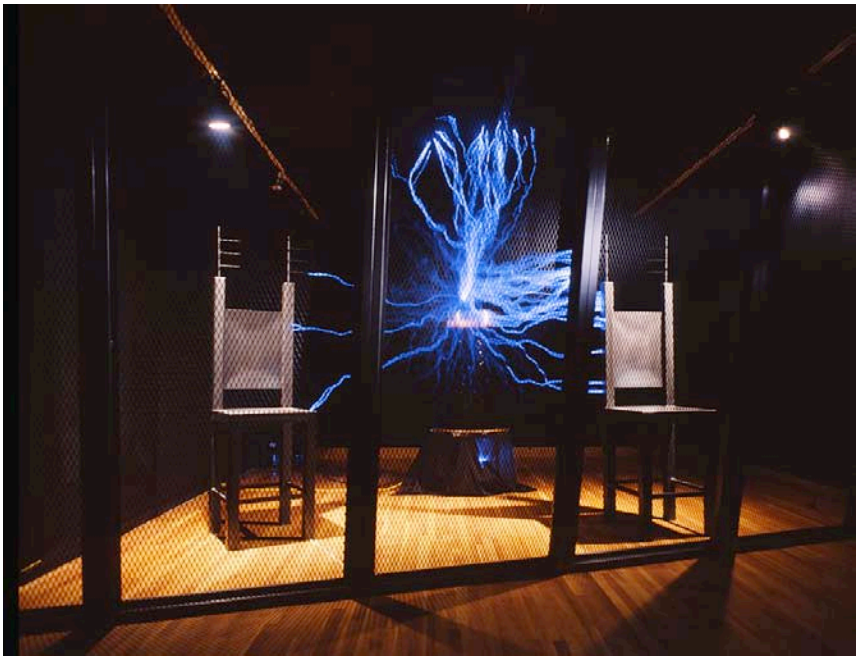
Bill Berkson
Invocations of the Surge Protector

Midway in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Edmund Burke identifies power as an essential component of sublimity by a rhetorical double negative: "I know of nothing sublime which is not some modification of power." Sublimity's sensory or ideational lift is characterized by a murky flow of negatives. Besides his "nothing . . . which is not," Burke lists such "general privations" as vacuity, darkness, solitude, silence. Negativity is as convenient a source of astonishment and awe as any display of positive excess.

Nowadays, to assert the sublime, with its associations of epiphenomenal grandeur compelling an abject piety, might appear unlikely and, more to the point, insufferable. Residual notions of transcendence have been tailored to the present's loose fit of skepticism

and chastened nostalgia. When high-minded artists like Philip Taaffe and Ross Bleckner speak respectively of a "mock" or "degraded" sublime, we hear them to mean a constricted, upended loftiness -- a grossly self-conscious art trespassing upon the Empyrean as if by the back door. As a term of Romantic moral philosophy and esthetics centering on the correlations of irresistible external forces and fitfully soaring inner states, the sublime has assumed a vaguely sociopathic tinge. Surely Immanuel Kant's idea of it as "an attempt to feel fear by aid of the imagination" proposes a heedless, possibly lethal pleonasm: the imagination has already made us fearful enough. In an age of image terrorism spawning reams of iconophobic critique, artists whose images bear the stamp of sublimity necessarily present their dressed-down surfaces as cautionary. The power struggle between intensified feeling and conscious reflection implicit in any traditional version of the sublime may now be analogous to the contradictory surges of dysfunctional meanings that build within a circuitry tuned by unseen, nameless cultural forces. The upshot is irradiated stasis -- a standoff, in fact, where images and viewers alike hang fixated, rapt in the recognition of their mutual displacement.



Doug Hall is an image-maker whose images carry the threat of such a stasis by regularly exposing the contrivance by which ineluctable powers are brought to visibility at a pitch where only fictions can exist. That contrivance is reciprocal, as much the viewer's business as the art's. In most of the videotapes, installations, paintings, sculptures, and other mixed-media pieces he has made during the past decade, Hall invokes the sublime both to participate in its intensities and to isolate its ways of claiming mastery over mental

space. Finally, the sublime becomes in Hall's work an issue of spatial orientation: to find a legible footing amid his images, one is thrown back to knowing how one sees them.

Beginning in 1985 with *Prelude to the Tempest*, the videotaped views of landscape under heavy weather that Hall, together with his principal cameraman Jules Backus, has recorded and edited, ravish the eye. But each of those views contains a formal reminder that our sensations are being prompted by careful formatting. As Hall writes:

> *The language in place in Romanticism to describe the epiphanous landscape, for instance, allows the viewer to achieve a sublime response—to nature, to machines, to the Nuremberg rallies, to architecture. It encourages an extreme subjectivity, which I think is a very dangerous state because it dispels that sort of cerebral mediation that should take place in experiencing the world.*
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> *Spectacle fulfills the functions of reinforcing aspects of power. The fallacy is that these displays are consumed passively. But events occur that manifest power, and we participate in them. Power is enforced from beneath. We're all complicit in it. I include agitation and intensity in my work to see how these mechanisms work, and the levels they play on. Art examines the mechanism.*

At once disembodied and boxed in, the video image of a tornado plowing up the near horizon (actually the lower rim of the matrix screen itself) stands revealed as just the whiff of an ur-text within a fastidiously mediated sign system. Within the limits of the make-believe image-field, Hall's self-proclaimed "insidious triumph of form over content" lets us envision the coordinates -- mental, emotional, public and private -- by which images negotiate their meanings.

Meaning is power. A meaning may be too deep or too convoluted to matter. Awaiting conversion into relevance, meaning spins in place, a pantomime of intent. The over determined symbol as a trap for meaning cuts off particularity and leaves a tag of dangling nonsense instead. An overload of groundless meaning can wipe out the field in which it appears, leaving images and our responses to them suddenly, stunningly, stranded. Given the

pressure of some images to mean more than any field can withstand, an artist may function to protect his field (and his audience, as well) against the excess surge. When meaning rises above a certain threshold, he detects it and shunts it aside, dissipating the surge.

Hall's work plies, as it supervises, the precipices of meaning and its lack. Or, more darkly, his spectacular displays entice us into the penetralium of image-and-meaning management, where power plays are effected with recognizably hyperbolic devices and defeat is necessary if we are to see what is actually before our eyes. By constantly pointing up his images' modes of presentation, Hall deflects belief in the very rhetoric he appears to celebrate. Perverse hyperbole meets conscientious deflation at the corners of his art's overt frames.

In both his early video and performance pieces (where the artist himself was visible) and his recent work (where he is not, having been replaced mostly by landscape), Hall has adopted the wittily austere persona of the executive artist—a kind of hypnogogic wizard who cranks up furious, high-visibility displays while ensconced at the controls. "There's a level of perversity in my work," he says, "a mad flirtation with the thing that is being deconstructed." Obsessive in his conceptions but detached in his procedures, he invokes executive privilege over matters that are arguably beyond control.

The Terrible Uncertainty of the Thing Described is a large-scale installation aligning three-channel video imagery and voluminous recorded sound with architectural devices and a live Tesla coil. Originally commissioned to form a part of Hall's 1987 multimedia retrospective at Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art, the piece appeared in a slightly different form at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art two winters ago as his contribution to the touring "American Landscape Video" exhibition. (The work will reappear there this May as part of the museum's permanent collection.) In a panel discussion linked to the opening of that show, Hall characteristically identified his entry's major themes

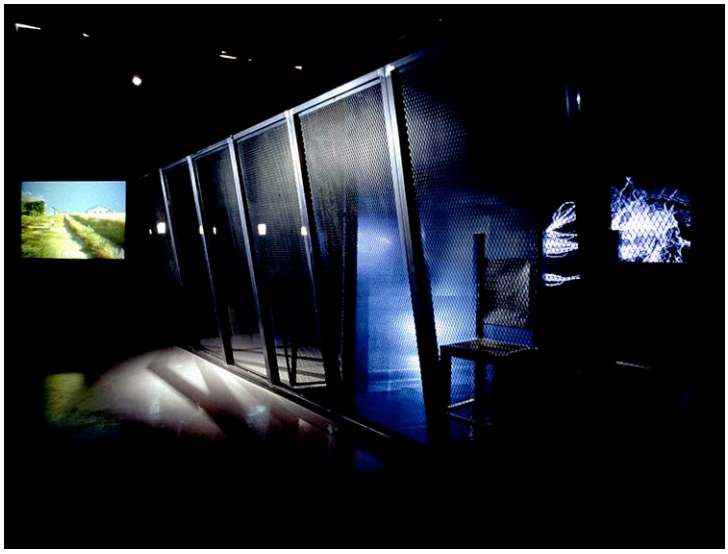
as “signs of power” and “the terror of mediation” and his particular interest as being “less . . . in landscape than in images of landscape” communicated via the “flatness” of video.

Like the previous single-channel videotape *Storm and Stress*, which uses some of the same footage, *The Terrible Uncertainty of the Thing Described* establishes much of its scale acoustically: the soundtrack’s roar and hiss, abrupt silences and bird twitters, all keyed to images of natural or fabricated turbulence, command more space more continuously than their visual counterparts. Hall has forced the flow of these audio portions so that they sweep through and galvanize abstract video’s typically horrific real-time tempos. Altogether, the installation presents the spectator with a diversified -- and ultimately collapsible -- esthetic machine. In the immaculate thrusts of its individual parts, it recalls Constructivist engineering esthetics enlarged upon by late-Minimalism’s charge that inert materials speak in their given languages. *The Terrible Uncertainty of the Thing Described* forms an emblematic locale -- an impersonal, speculative test site for our persistent notions of how external phenomena condition or confirm strong emotion. The title, suggestive of Romantic sensationalism, comes directly from Burke’s *Enquiry*. As an example of the obscurity required to transfix the mind in its amazement, Burke singles out an account of disembodied vision from the *Book of Job* (“Then a spirit passed before my eyes. The hair of my flesh stood up.”); this passage Burke credits with “a sublimity . . . principally due to the terrible uncertainty of the thing described.”

Inside the dark gallery at SFMOMA, you meet with a thirty-foot-long, ten-foot-high, black-steel-mesh fence that looms outward at a ten-degree tilt. As the prime structural element, the fence shears the room in half diagonally, forming, at the far end, the see-through front of a trapezoidal cage. Against the near wall behind the fence perch six video monitors hoisted on steel tubes. The videotape, projected onto the far wall where the fence stops as well as on the monitors, intercuts between tidal rushes of assorted cataclysmic scenery -- a flood, a blast furnace, a forest fire, the prow of a Coast Guard vessel plunging into massive

swells on the Bering Sea, thunder and lightning, a clash of energy in a utility company's test facility, storm plains matted onto video "snow." Near the wall projection, in the enclosure fronted by the fence, are two spotlit, grotesquely outsized metal chairs, and behind them, the work's featured eminence, the Tesla coil.

The coil is alarming. Hall refers to it as "an information-encoding and transmitting device in a very crude form." (Its visionary, Serbo-American inventor, Nikola Tesla, thought of the high-frequency current transformer as capable of resonating "if nothing else, intelligence" throughout the earth's atmosphere, and farther, to other planets; as it is, his tunings of such apparatuses form the basis of present-day electronic-media circuitry.)



While the videotape continuously reshuffles its exquisitely edited turmoil views, the Tesla coil has been timed to discharge its million-volt-plus plasmic load in lengthy, chaotic streamers of branch lightning at half-hour intervals. The enclosure made by the porous fence and the attached metal sheeting lining the ceiling, floor and connecting walls is necessary to ground the violent discharge and filter out the attendant radio waves (as the blueprint says, "to minimize RF interference").

Set in the penumbral recess of this housing device, the coil's squat, ithyphallic presence viscerally overprepares us for the audiovisual shock of its eventual "information" dispersal, which, when it happens, is instantly distinguishable from the remote depictions piped in on the monitors. Upstaged by the immediate fireworks as if by some monster from the id, the video imagery gains another sort of credence as the sublimated representation of powers analogous to those of the coil. Awaiting the coil's eruption while watching Hall's capsule vignettes of technology and weather, the museumgoer submits to half-an-hour worth of drawn-out conceptual panic. In a sense, the coil is the work's surrogate performance artist, leaving room to spare for the viewer as the ultimate subject. Then the explosive moment

passes, and we are back with the sensory baffle of video's imagistic elsewheres and the coil's tacit threat.

Obviously, part of the thrill lies in the viewer's submitting to the event on the premise that the artist knows what he's doing -- that Hall has supervised the work so as to keep the audience safe from the coil's potentially destructive powers, as safe as they are from the tornados ripping apart fields and city blocks on the video screens. The viewer's sublimity is measured by the capacity to epiphanize his or her position in the room, as well as to form any number of mental models for what is happening in it. Hence Hall's motto for the total experience: "The storm is in the mind; the lightning is in the room." But the mind knows that it, too, is in the room and the storm is a conventional narrative it tells itself by rote. Acknowledging the dream state induced by the luminous views flickering in the dark space, Hall indicates that the Tesla coil's actual discharge "wakes you from your reverie."

Hall makes esthetic distance literal. It's his way of protecting his art from the upheavals and outages that are its norm. Churning and wagging across the monitor screens, the tornados have a forlorn, self-importantly stupefied charm like the heroines of Romantic decadence. In *Storm and Stress*, the soundtrack of the "Lux Aeterna" passage from Guiseppe Verdi's *Requiem* is as perfect an accompaniment to the video images' distanced power as to their almost quaint, dreamy imagistic languor. The tornadoes are, in a sense, funerary icons, dead dreams; and the intimate, beaming video box is their crypt. We may imagine ourselves tossed about by these sights, but the game of haunting appearances is up when one member of the tornado-intercept team in *Storm and Stress* exclaims, as a funnel cloud exits screen right of the image, "I got it, I got it on video!" and another calls out, "That's close enough -- let's go!"

We know that real power is invisible; it can only be indexed by paltry sign systems, or else talked up in the manner of the solitary tyrant bombinating on the chill, empty set of *These Are the Rules* from *Songs of the '80s*. The social equivalent to nature's moods, whether primal or artificially engineered, is demagogic pageantry. From his early days as a member of the Conceptualist group T. R. Uthco (1970-78), through to his current set of wall pieces, "Winners and Losers," Hall has plumbed the visual and verbal mannerisms of political power foisted through the news media. In T. R. Uthco and Ant Farm's 1975 performance/video collaboration *The Eternal Frame*, he portrays a "celebrity heaven" mock-

up of John F. Kennedy reduplicatedly assassinated on the streets of Dallas. Near the beginning of the videotape, he faces the camera to intone a monologue from behind an appropriately laminated desk: “As your image president . . . I suffered my image death . . . August 10, 1975.” The heroic climate has been designed to fit the format and not the other way around.

The main body of “Winners and Losers” is a stop-and-go sequence of thirty-one steel-framed panels. Hung as the centerpiece of Hall’s show this past March at the Fuller-Gross Gallery in San Francisco, the panels were, as he says, “laid out like a page” across a wall.

Proceeding by syntactic subsets -- groupings of from two to five and an occasional single piece, with blank spaces in between -- the sequence amounts to a rebus of uncertain closure. The panels themselves are standard art-supply canvases snugly overlaid with either rag paper or double-weight photographic stock; with their obdurate-looking frames they have roughly the same proportions as a television screen. Hall has built up the surfaces by applying dense layers from his customary palette of dry, blended pigments bonded with shellac; there are masked-out areas where key images break clear of the murk. Six of the panels have central elements resembling reductivist abstractions. Four of these contain a color disk spray-coated on a nebulous field of scumbled browns and yellows; the other two repeat the same four colors, once as the quadrants of a color wheel and again as squares abutted like the color bars in a video test pattern. Emblematic, nominally abstract images, punctuating a sequence whose terms of legibility are otherwise keyed to the human figure in its most public phases, the disks and their grounds readily suggest close-up images of pupils and irises, an association that Hall himself accepts without having planned it: after all, he says, the red, blue, green and yellow shapes, which refer to the printing industry’s four-color separation process, are “about seeing.”

The remaining twenty-five panels show fragmentary halftone images of twentieth-century male political figures, severely cropped into simple geometric shapes and set in mostly blackened, mat fields. Judiciously defined by the sharp peephole edges of a triangle, circle, or rectangle, the stark, close detail -- sometimes just a pair of eyes, or more radically, the fingers of one hand -- teases our appetite to complete what we see. Commandeering a globular node very like the man in the moon, a glaring pate, squinty eyes, and a stub of nostrils come to evoke the countenance of Nikita Khrushchev. A scalene triangle and an off-center circle in separate panels hold two different slices from the by-now iconic media image of Jack Ruby killing Lee Harvey Oswald while Oswald's jailors look on (we need only see the slant of a Dallas deputy's tie and shirtfront to recall his fall-away grimace at the shot).

Hall's synecdochical details slip into the nonfigurative as readily as their hyperbolically localized features demand acknowledgment of the physical characteristics we have memorized without half trying. If the colored disks refer to the mechanics of information-processing, these studiously isolate archival hieroglyphs spark our feeling for lost essences in the ranks of the already processed: the token immanence of a face, revealed by the weak signals of its most intimate aspects, leaves us in a blanket state of incomprehension. In the game of naming, we don't know what we see, although we know how to recognize almost anything and to assign it a name.

The steel frames possess their own peculiar resonance: they have the burnished, authoritarian look of gun barrels. If we have been targeted to receive the mnemonic blips and figments they contain, some response must be in order. But what does the attenuated image show us besides the fact that it has been edited to a state of informational thinness almost literally beyond recognition and that, despite this -- and despite the bleak, wraithlike appearance that such shards from vintage photographs often possess -- recognition persists? Such recognition pinpoints the random allusiveness of memory's debris.

Some of the other multipanel pieces in the Fuller-Gross show contain mug shots of mass murderers blocked out with slots that emphasize the eyes. These polyptych portraits put a fresh spin on the adage "If looks could kill." Interspersed among them are panels that partake of Hall's color-coded brand of abstraction -- low-resolution streaks of blue, red and yellow appear once some of the surface layers have been rubbed away. The killers' grim stares are answered by a prickliness like broadcast static in the excoriated paint. Since

murderers and political figures appear in similar formats, there's the implication that demagoguery and criminality are aligned. But then positing a complete identity as either a murderer or a tyrant is a kind of abstraction, too. As Hall says, "Abstraction is that point on either side of coherence. The look of the murderer's eyes is significantly different from the eyes of politicians. The eyes of those murderers are pretty unsettling."

In yet another new group of paintings, Hall has let enamel paint run down the faces of inset squares and then lined up the same colors "rationally" in horizontal rows of smaller monochrome blocks below. Like the opaque layouts of "Winners and Losers," these composite surfaces leak nostalgia for psychospiritual depth perception. Possible meanings accumulate in entropic spills while all the signifiers flatten. In place of content there is surface drain. Hall guides us to the point at which cultural modalities sink back into nature. "Nature" can be any artist's materials -- pigments to be smeared (or dripped) or subject matter or memory, the more compelling the better. Hall keeps his nature on a short leash. Playing it out, he lures us to both grant nature's powers and test them, without ever actually allowing the tension into which envisioned power throws our faculties to collapse.

Erecting and then peeling away layers of surface -- can the truth be gauged on either side? Mostly, art tells us that its messages, mixed and unmixed, can be received only at face value. But Hall says, "I want more than that. The poignancy in my work comes from the need to get beyond the surface, to another level of meaning. You want to peel underneath the image and find out what's there and of course you can't. Into this quest is built a horrible futility, but just because I can't find it doesn't mean that level doesn't exist."