This interview was conducted on February 11, 2007, at Doug Hall's studio in San Francisco, CA for the catalog for *California Video* at the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles. Glenn Phillips, exhibition curator, interviewed Doug Hall (representing T. R. Urthco) and Chip Lord (representing Ant Farm).

Glenn Phillips: This interview is a little different than the other ones for this book, because we're talking about the history of a collaboration between two collectives, Ant Farm and T.R. Uthco, on a single work, *The Eternal Frame* (1975). Let's start by talking about how each of these two groups came to be.

Chip Lord: I think there was a strong imperative within the counterculture to be communal and collective. I had met Doug Michels when he came on a lecture tour in 1967 to Tulane, and we were both in San Francisco by the summer of 1968. At the time, there was a sense of an underground culture; there was underground radio, underground newspapers, and we described to a friend what we were doing was underground architecture, and she said "Oh like an Ant Farm. That's underground architecture." So instantly we had a name and a logo and an official color, which was Ant Farm green. Ant Farms only came in Astroturf green at that time.

Doug Hall: T.R. Uthco's story is little different. Jody Procter who had been my roommate at Harvard was living in San Francisco and was married to my younger sister at the time. We had collaborated in college doing some odd performances and actions, mainly relating to language and gesture. We were also very politicized, and were involved in SDS and other political situations. The third member of our group, Diane Andrews, and I met later at Skowhegan. When Diane and I moved to San Francisco after graduate school in Baltimore, we decided that we would form some kind of collaboration between the three of us. For many of the same reasons that Chip stated, we had a sense that somehow we were part of an avant-guard culture that was trying to find other ways of operating – politically, socially, aesthetically. We found collaboration to be productive, and kept working that way for about 8 years.

GP: How did the two groups ever decide to collaborate?

Doug Hall: We were kind of at loose ends in terms of our institutional relationships. For example, the NEA, which started around that time, had no funding for collaborative groups; it was individual artists, and the structure of the art world seemed prejudiced against people working collaboratively. So part of what we found was allies in one another. There was a kind of sustenance that came with this group activity; it made us feel less alienated. In San Francisco, there was a very different kind of scene going on,

gravitating around Howard Fried, Terry Fox and Paul Kos, among others. Their work came out of a different sensibility than the one that we were involved in, and we didn't feel that we fit into it. So we needed to find our own way, and I think we gave each other the confidence to work collaboratively.

GP: Why don't you describe *The Eternal Frame*. It would be interesting to hear what you thought you were doing.

Chip Lord: At the time the tag line was "An authentic remake of the Kennedy assassination," and the original title was going to be *Death Bullets*. I remember meeting here at Doug's house, and I remember a collective energy of one person egging the other one on, and out of that came "God, what if we actually went to Dallas and did that--you know, filmed it, videotaped it," and it was like—silence. Whoa. Everybody took a step back. Anybody who was at a certain age in 1963 remembers that moment of hearing the news that Kennedy was assassinated, and then sitting down in front of the TV for the next 48 hours. All three networks went live, and Walter Cronkite narrated the whole event, and there were no commercials for the next, I think it was 72 hours, until the funeral. So that's something that hasn't been replicated—even 9/11, they were still showing commercials—and then Jack Ruby was shot on live TV. So the combination of those elements had an incredible importance, and I think a symbolic one. It was an outpouring of empathy, but you were experiencing it in this mediated way.

Doug Hall: It was a galvanizing moment in the history of popular media, and it was a moment where everyone was kind of locked in step for a short amount of time. There have been other events since that have had similar galvanizing affects, but this was the first of the great tele-visual spectaculars. The event – the tragic assassination of an American president and the aftermath– became convoluted as it unfolded over time, its original meaning mutating as it was filtered through the media. As the event became popularized, it lost its relationship to its source and spread out into the culture, as an evolving narrative that sort of folded back on itself like a mobius strip.

Chip Lord: When we hatched the idea, Ant Farm was already engaged in this other project, which became *Media Burn* (1975). At that point, *Media Burn* was about creating this one image of a car crashing through a wall of TV sets. But we knew we had to structure something around it, and it just seemed perfect to bring a politician to speak, and to do it on July 4th. So we had T.R. Uthco's character of the Artist President make an appearance at *Media Burn*.

Doug Hall: He'd been making some appearances before that. Jody Procter was our Ted Sorenson; I was the Artist President and he was my speechwriter. We would go to universities where we did various sorts of performances, depending on the context. One

of the formats we began to adopt was in the tone and posture of the political speech. These were mainly speeches about making speeches; there was no message in the sense of a traditional message. My later videotape, *The Speech*, is the best remaining evidence of these sorts of performances.

Chip Lord: It wasn't JFK, I mean you wouldn't say "Please welcome the Artist President, John F. Kennedy." It was a generic president.

Doug Hall: That's right, but it was definitely done with a Kennedy accent.

GP: So when did he become more of a JFK figure in appearance?

Chip Lord: Once we began to form *The Eternal Frame*. Once Doug Michels signed on to be Jackie, then obviously he had to have makeup and costuming, so we found the makeup artist for the San Francisco Opera.

Doug Hall: This was such an outrageous idea, but the makeup artist got into it with great enthusiasm. I think you've seen the charts that he prepared for us; and then Diane learned to do the makeup.

Chip Lord: By that time there was lot of momentum because we were given money by Doug Kenny of the National Lampoon, and Jim Newman from Dilexi Gallery had signed on with some backing, and we found the Lincoln Continental Convertible, which we bought for about $300.

Doug Hall: That car ran on two cylinders

Chip Lord: We had to tow it from San Francisco to Dallas.

GP: So you've decided you're gonna do it, you've raised some money, you've figured out the makeup and outfits, what sort of arrangements did you need to make in Dallas?

Chip Lord: Uh… well, we made no arrangements.

Doug Hall: The only arrangements that I'm aware of—well, there were a lot of people involved with this event. Videofreex was involved, Skip Blumberg and Bart Friedman particularly. Stanley Marsh made our hotel arrangements, which was in a Doris Day-

owned hotel as I recall. The idea was “Dude, this has gotta be a guerilla event. Very, very low key; we have to be quiet in the hotel, we’re gonna sneak out at like six in the morning, that’s it and that should be enough.” And of course with this group of people, it was out of control. Loud, people walking up and down drunk, it was horrible. But we did get there at six in the morning, and oddly enough there was no interference at all. We just kept going through it and through it. I think Skip and Bart were really tuned into how to videotape an event like this.

Chip Lord: This was a complicated production, and we knew there had to be the Zapruder camera, there had to be the Orville Nix camera on the other side of the street, and we thought we should have color video, and black-and-white video, and super-8 film. Super-8 would be the most authentic to the original Zapruder film. So there were a number of camera positions, and then we needed still photographers, so this is why the personnel grew. The guy who had originally gotten us the video equipment in 1969, Pepper Molser, was in Houston, so he drove up, and Alan Shulman was a guy who did commercial production in the bay area, who had 3/4" color equipment. We did one run-through in San Francisco with a smaller crew in the Presidio, and then we drove to Amarillo towing the car.

Doug Hall: We also choreographed it. The timing is obviously very slow the way we reenacted it, but we definitely worked a lot on the gestures and what the sequence was.

Chip Lord: And that was from the copy of the Zapruder film that we had.

GP: And how did you have a copy of the film?

Chip Lord: We weren’t really that interested in the conspiracy theories, but the conspiracy theory people were the ones who had the film. I think Doug Michels must have made that contact, because I don’t remember. Somehow, we got a 16mm copy of the film. The original Zapruder film was of course immediately bought by Life Magazine, and individual stills were on the cover of *Life* the next week. It then went into the Vault, but guess what--somebody at the lab made a copy, so from the very beginning there were bootleg copies that slipped out. The copy we had was multiple generations removed, so it had almost no color left in it. But it was enough to use as a visual model for the gestures.

GP: Were you afraid of how people might react to seeing two men dressed as JFK and Jackie?

Doug Hall: We were nervous. We knew we were treading on something that was dangerous; it's an iconic image that we seem to be offhandedly playing around with, and that's why we imagined that we would go there very early in the morning, go through there once, and that would probably be it because everything would close in on us.

Chip Lord: I think the roles really had to do with the dynamic and competitiveness between the two groups. Once this idea was hatched, obviously Doug Hall had to be the Artist President, but the next best part in the drama was Jackie, and that had to be a member of Ant Farm, and that was alpha male, Doug Michels. So, he didn't even volunteer. It was just like "Okay you're gonna be Jackie." It also adds an interesting tension which is: from the position of Zapruder, which is pretty far away, is it gonna matter? The pink dress is more important than who is inhabiting it really. And if the pink dress and the hat are done well—actually they don't even have to be done well for that matter.

Doug Hall: That's the thing, the ingredients of the image can be pared down to the bare minimum and still be credible.

Chip Lord: And in *The Eternal Frame* what proves the role I think is the way the people on the street reacted. It wasn't a very authentic remake. It's just one car, there was no advance car, no motorcade, and only one Secret Service Agent. But it was enough for people to lock right back in their memory to that moment and shed a tear.

GP: You thought you'd go there early in the morning, you'd do it in one take and that would be it, but that's not really what happened.

Chip Lord: I think it was 7 AM by the time we arrived at Dealey Plaza, and already there was a guy there with his kids; you know, an American who had come to show his kids where the assassination took place. We hadn't really thought about these people who come every day to see the spot, and immediately Skip Blumberg and Bart Friedman just start rolling tape and talking to this guy. At that time of day, the sun was throwing really long shadows. It didn't look right, so we just kept doing take after take, and we did maybe 14 or 15 takes. It took about 15 minutes to go around each time. More people would show up, and they were sticking around because they arrived during the middle of it and they wanted to see the whole thing again

Doug Hall: The thing that's kind of odd about that particular location is how staged it already feels. It's actually quite small, and the colonnade that forms the back of the grassy knoll looks like a fake classical facade, so it has this feeling of being a stage set

already. Also surprising is that people just assumed that it was being put on by the Chamber of Commerce and the City of Dallas as a way to commemorate the original event. Which is so-- I certainly hadn't expected that, and I don't think anyone else had. It really tells you something about how we experience events – or more properly how we experience the *locations* where important historical events took place – and what our expectations are when we come to them. In a way, I guess people are disappointed if they're *not* delivered this kind of strange product – one that rekindles the emotions that they might associate with the actual event.

GP: It is one of the amazing things that, for the public, it seemed completely natural. Dealey Plaza is just forever locked in the repetition of this event, so of course it's the place where people were supposed to go to re-experience it.

Doug Hall: The repetition is one of the aspects of *The Eternal Frame* that interests me the most. An event happens, and then all this other stuff begins to glom onto it. It's like this huge media snowball that gathers force. So it's all about how the event, situated in the world, occurs, and then the fiction begins to emanate out from it. It's almost like a semiotic shift takes place, and *The Eternal Frame* is all about the nature of that shift, the repetition and accumulation of information.

Chip Lord: Obviously, it wasn't theorized in that way prior to the shooting of the event, but the repetitions ultimately becomes a built-in looped replay, a tele-visual replay of the activity.

GP: And how did you get from raw footage to the finished video? Did you know that it would result in this structured finished work?

Doug Hall: We just didn't have any idea what would come out of it. I think we were all very anxious about that. A lot of people in the art world were really upset with us. In the Bay Area, it was: "Don't talk to those guys, they're just fucked." And initially we had difficulty getting anyone to look at it after it was finished.

Chip Lord: We did some preliminary editing by November as the anniversary of Kennedy's death rolled around. T.R. Uthco was out on the road doing college gigs and Ant Farm was back in San Francisco, and we each did performative presentations. In San Francisco, somebody from a local TV station called the Ant Farm and said "We understand you have a copy of the Zapruder film; we'd like to borrow the film and run it." At this point, the Zapruder film had never been broadcast. We said "Okay, we'll give you the film. and why don't you plug our performance on your station?" We did this event at the Unitarian Church –you could rent the hall inexpensively there – and showed some

video, but mostly showed slides. We didn't have the Artist President; but we had another crew come and interview people as they left, and there you get the spectrum of those who hated it and those who thought it was brilliant art.

Doug Hall: T.R. Uthco had the same situation; we didn't have an edited version yet. We just had some copies of the tapes that we were traveling with, and we had lots of slides. Leading up to our showing at The Anthology film Archives in New York, we had been on the road doing a performance called *Great Moments* that mixed live performance with projected film, slides, audio, and video. As a result we were very comfortable doing presentations that switched between media. At Anthology I think I made a speech at the beginning in that kind of Kennedy-esque voice, and then we proceeded with combinations of slides, audio, and video tape.

Chip Lord: Eventually, we edited it collectively at Long Beach Museum of Art.

GP: And then you also exhibited the piece as an installation at Long Beach.

Chip Lord: Well, I think initially we were looking for a place to edit it, and it was either Bay Area Video Coalition or Long Beach, and David Ross was enthusiastic and said "Oh, you've gotta edit it here." I think he even gave us some money to come down there. We probably talked about how we might exhibit it while we were there editing. But honestly, I don't remember how the physical idea of the installation evolved. We had all these souvenirs, which was part of the preliminary research, and we'd just been gathering them at the flea market as a way of fostering a sense of the kitschiness of the event. So I guess it was logical to put it into a living room environment that would be a lower middle class 1963 living room. It was easy to find everything in Long Beach. It was 1976, so, you know, the Goodwill Store and other thrift shops yielded many…
Doug Hall: Choice items.

GP: I'd like to go back a little bit to the production. It's a simple question. Doug, did you have to redo your head-wound makeup each time?

Doug Hall: I don't know that we did that. I do remember the most grotesque moment was when there was this rotten watermelon we found in the roadway, and someone said, "Doug, do you mind splattering that against your forehead?" Nothing held back as far as verisimilitude was concerned.

Chip Lord: "Take this handful of watermelon and slap it on your head."

Doug Hall: “Okay director, you know, I’m just talent here, whatever you want.”

Chip Lord: I think that was my brilliant idea.

Doug Hall: Yeah, that was your brilliant idea. But I think that may have been the last run actually; it was certainly toward the end.

Chip Lord: But Jackie looked good all the time.

Doug Hall: Jackie was beautiful, Jackie was beautiful. But Jackie didn’t really do much—oh, yeah she did: she had to grab the watermelon – ersatz brain tissue – and pretend to put it back in.

Chip Lord: Or TRY to put it back in.