

***Art Historian, Richard Tuttle Interviews Doug Hall***  
**From *InFinite Spaces*, Newcomb Art Gallery, Tulane University, New Orleans, 2003**

**(1) Richard Tuttle: Before coming to still photography you were deeply and successfully involved with a variety of other media--sculpture, video, installation, performance. What accounts for the shift of interest? Did photography predate or accompany your work in the 1970s and 1980s? And are you still pursuing video?**

**Doug Hall:** Around 1987, I began working on a project called *People in Buildings* – a two-channel video installation that involved looking at peoples’ everyday activities within institutional spaces like government offices, hospitals, libraries. I was looking for individual expression within places that seemed to disallow, or at least were immune to, personal desire. In the process of working on the piece, I became acutely aware of the spaces themselves and how they seemed to define the conditions that I was witnessing. It’s what inspired me to move to large format photography. I began by photographing some of the corridors that had appeared in the videotape. Before, photography had been present in my work but it had been peripheral, not even approaching the importance it has now.

The other thing that motivated the shift—and maybe this is related to the first— was a need to free myself from the narrative of time-based media. And by narrative I not only mean the unfolding of events in the sense of a story but more importantly a temporality that flows and takes the viewer along with it—like a leaf fallen into a river, moving at a speed that’s determined by the current. And I really needed something else. I wanted the viewers to have more control over time so they could determine the image or determine themselves into it. In other words, be given the time and the space to scrutinize, to imagine. This occurs most easily when we govern time and are not governed by it. So the answer is yes I have left video and video installation, but I reserve the right to return if and when the need arises.

**(2)RT: The subject matter you dealt with earlier often referenced political and social issues. I am thinking of videotapes such as "The Speech" (1982) or the video installation "Machinery for the re-education of a Delinquent Dictator" (1983-1985) or sculpture such as "The Arrogance of Power" (1987). Have you abandoned or perhaps recast engagement with such aggressive issues?**

**DH:** Maybe that’s the word. By “aggressive” I think what we mean is that the works enforce a point of view. And they’re somewhat didactic in that way. I think that as I’ve gotten older and hopefully a little more sophisticated about images and how we gain meaning from them I’ve found other ways to operate; ways that are more compatible with my deeper interests. I guess what I’m trying to say is that my better photographs—this is my hope at any rate— don’t so much talk at you as with you. In other words, they have less ‘aboutness.’ The photograph’s ‘aboutness’ doesn’t overpower ones experience of the image. My hope is that it opens up places for viewers to reflect on themselves so that unconsciously the photograph looks back. It’s a question of distance. I think that one of

the really wonderful things I found in photography is that it has this hyper-literalness that both anchors it to the world and gives it the potential to extend beyond it. The trick for me is to take a picture that refers to a particular place but can, when liberated from its source, operate somewhat independently –like a cipher that accumulates new meaning. This is what I mean when I say the photograph begins to function allegorically. High resolution, large format photography provides an image of exquisite detail at a focal depth that's beyond the capabilities of the naked eye. It's as if its frozen literalness frees it from the literal. It remains there, fixed and stationary, a recollection that waits for our return. It's when we stand in front of the photograph that it abandons whatever claims it might have of accurately describing the world, and assumes its more important one of describing ourselves

**(3)RT: And each beholder, each venue, brings something new to it.**

**DH:** Oh yes. And I think that that's something I learned from doing installations: an awareness that images have a relationship to our bodies that has to do with scale and with how the photographs interact with one another in the space. For example, when you stand in a gallery surrounded by photographs there are multiple conditions that you're accounting for: There's the room; there's yourself in the room; there are the images and their relationships to one another and to you. All of these inform the experience and influence how we draw meaning from it.

**(4)RT: Historically photographs miniaturized the world, but the new scale challenges that tradition.**

**DH:** That's right. I think that photography, even large photographs, miniaturize the world. It miniaturizes it and puts a frame around it, making it appear to be coherent, which is both a deception and a delight. Large scale photography makes even the mundane seem grand. This is a potential problem in my work and I need to be aware of it so that the photographs don't heroicize their content to the point where they put into abeyance the possibility of more critical relationships. For me it's a real balancing act of how to handle this contradiction. The fact is that I believe in visual pleasure and try to allow ample space for it within my pictures. I also value criticality.

**(5)RT: Contemporary photography is evolving thanks to new digital and chemical technologies. Would you care to comment on how this has affected you?**

**DH:** My process shares some of the attributes of early photography, which was all done on a tripod with view cameras similar to the one I use. However, because of advances in photographic technology, the finished image has more in common with cinema than early photography. Part of this is the result of advances in camera lenses and film. But the biggest difference has been the emergence of digital technologies over the past 5 years, which allow unbelievable control over the image from start to finish. For example, the photographs that I did of opera houses in Italy would be impossible with analog photography. Using film, I overexposed the negative which, if I were to make a conventional print, would blow out the bright areas in order to get rich darks. But I have

the negatives scanned into the computer and using digital post-production techniques I can get the brightest brights, even showing the filaments in some of the light bulbs, as well as rich darks in the deepest shadows. Digital output also allows one to achieve scale without sacrificing color saturation or sharpness.

The result, I think, is that you begin to approach this idea of an optical unconscious that was formulated by Walter Benjamin. It's because the picture contains so many things you could never have seen with your naked eye, allowing the image to insinuate itself into ones unconscious. I think the result is a richness in the photographs and I don't think it's simply a richness of color. It's one of recognition. I think it's a kind of recognition that we can't quite fathom or even feel entirely comfortable with. It's a richness that stares back at us.

**(6)RT: I am reminded of Jan Van Eyck's Ghent altarpiece, where vast panoramas are there to be explored, if you only get close enough to the painting.**

**DH:** This is the point. I think that's exactly right. It makes me think, too, that both are non-hierarchical in that all objects are presented as if they have the same degree of importance. Obviously there's a foreground, middle, and background. But all grounds receive the same attention and are in focus throughout, something that's impossible in nature.

**(7)RT: Over the years the thematic diversity of your images is striking both in terms of geographic locations and the range of subject matter within them: art museums and hospitals, archives and laboratories, entertainment and shopping centers, western deserts and Asian riverscapes plus some panoramic city views. While each image certainly provides its own particular riches, challenges and rewards, are there commonalities programmed or contingent?**

**DH:** Starting with my earliest work from the mid-1970's up until the present my interests have been pretty consistent. If I were to boil these down to one sentence, which I hate to do, I'd have to say that the work circles around and through the role that institutions play in constructing our experiences of the world and of ourselves in it. I'm very much a product of the 60's and am still influenced by the social critiques that I was introduced to then. I'm thinking, for example, of theories of reification that came out of Marxism and later George Lukács, The Frankfurt School – Adorno, Horkheimer, and others like Walter Benjamin whose work I know in some depth. While some of this analysis I accept and some I reject, what I've found inspiring is how they all, in different ways, provide a non-totalizing description of the world that recognizes, even privileges, difference. But maybe I'm getting off the track here. Also I'm afraid I make my process sound much more rational than it actually is. Let's see if I can return to the question about what I photograph.

As I think about it now I guess I'd say that I'm photographing the World Stage, implying that some of our experiences are formed through institutional stage craft. So I try to get to places where I can observe and record how this staging plays out– how it plays out over a

wide range, both culturally and institutionally. For example, while standing on a bridge overlooking the Red River in Hanoi, I might recall a road I shot in the desert Southwest or the synthetic ocean environment I photographed in Yokohama or a train station in Sao Paulo. It's not so simple as saying there are similarities between these places. Or even that there are differences. I'm trying to describe something that's more psychical and unconscious. I'll call it deep recognition. I think photography is uniquely equipped to provide the mechanisms that make this recognition possible. I try to find those places where it can be extracted. And finally it's in the exhibition where this can all be set into motion for the viewer.

It seems that there are two basic ways of organizing an exhibition of my photographs. The first is to select them typologically so, for example, you have an exhibition of just opera houses. The second way, which is much more interesting to me, is to choose images that can rub up against one another, believing that this friction—I guess the viewer is the pumice in this metaphor of abrasion—will liberate some content, hidden or latent, within the photographs. At the very least a non-typological arrangement allows uncertainty to enter into the equation and I take this to be a positive condition because it forces us to be active and inquisitive. Typology is a summing up, an argument for coherence and knowability. Putting images in constellations—to borrow a metaphor from Benjamin—is to do the opposite. And that's very much what I've attempted to do here.

**(8)RT: Your pictures might be considered the flip-side of "up-close and personal" because they shun the anecdotal and the narrative. Both crowd scenes and empty spaces are under surveillance but dialog is not permitted. Can you tell us something about this?**

**DH:** We talked about this a little bit earlier when discussing narrative. I guess I would add that my interests are more in the context in which events are unfolding. I'm interested in people seen through the constructed spaces in which they operate. This is true for me even when the scenes are uninhabited. But by narrowing in on just the people, you can lose sight of the overall context in which things are occurring. I'd like to believe that there's an emotional content to the work and part of this, if it does exist, is in the anonymity of some of the scenes and the implied struggle for identity that resides in anonymity. I think distance is important in my work. On the one hand it's the cold distance of surveillance. Secondly it contains the pathos of anonymity, as I just mentioned. And finally it provides the indifference required for criticality.

**(9)RT: Very often strong linear perspective commands the composition of your images, transporting the beholder into very deep imaginary space. Others eschew artificial means in favor of the panoramic view, which allows no entry. Is there a dialectic of seeing/representing here?**

**DH:** That's true. There are different perspectives between the various projects. Part of this is circumstantial in the sense that each situation invites its own mode of address. What isn't circumstantial and is, in fact, very carefully planned is how I position the camera so that I can extract a particular content from the scene. The way the finished

photograph is structured or formalized has a great deal to do with the kind of meaning it will finally contain and how a viewer will gain access to it. I make this all sound very pat and it isn't. Sometimes I get it right away. Other times I have to keep coming back and even then may not get it at all. The photograph, Piazza Rotondo, is an example of coming back many times over the course of several years. I had this image in my mind of the exterior of the Pantheon looking like the set from Tosca and it took me a lot of tries to get the framing so that some sense of this came through. The three panel panorama of Sao Paulo, on the other hand, practically took itself. The difficult part there was finding the right location. So I guess it's appropriate to describe this as dialectical. It starts with me and, hopefully, includes the viewers as they negotiate the divergent perspectives of the photographs.

**(10)RT: One can feel disquieted by the photographs-- seduced by their beauty, richness of detail and color, but then left uncertain about whether one has been just dazzled, controlled, ravished, or rebuffed.**

**DH:** As a way of getting at this, let's go back to perspective and talk about what this could represent. In my imagination it represents both the problem and the triumph of the photographic image. Single point perspective is a form that emerged out of Humanism. It contains this idea that one is the center of the world and all will unfold before me, logically and rationally. The world, in other words, is unified and whole and coherent. And, of course, reality is not like this. In the world, things are as they are. Objects move past us. Our heads turn. Our bodies are in motion. Vision falls off at the periphery. Things come closer and move far away. We are not the all-knowing stable subject that perspective implies. Nor will the objective world lay itself out before us, compliant and fixed. So it's not unfair to say that perspective is a contrivance and as such a deceit. In my photographs that accentuate perspective like those I did of desert highways or Italian opera houses the formative role of perspective is an essential content of the pictures. And it plays a double role. On the one hand I think it draws attention to itself as symbolic form. And on the other it offers salvation. There's an "ah, yes," the world is stopped here for a moment and I have the best seat in the house.

**(11)RT: It's a pleasure idea?**

**DH:** Certainly there's pleasure in it. There's also deception. Photography is the art that claims to be describing the world while eliminating those parts of it that it doesn't want you to see. It locates you at a very particular scene and orients your eyes. It does this even as it makes a claim to representing reality. But the edge of the frame doesn't allow you to see the pile of garbage just to the left out of the scene. Now, there are a lot of artists who've dealt with this problem in very different ways. They've confronted it by not being so formal, by shooting from the hip, by using all kinds of techniques to make the perspectival frame seem to fall away. In my work I want you to be absolutely aware of the artifice. I would like the edge of the photograph—or more accurately, what's beyond the edge—to be considered. I want you to be aware of what you're not seeing to the left and the right. I think that revealing the heavy hand of perspective is one way I can do that.

**(12)RT: Beyond feeling comfortable, there's the material to be studied in the picture. Taking in the whole opera house, one moves on to individual chairs, the lamps, the chandeliers, the paintings, the things contained. That's combining two different things, historically speaking.**

**DH:** Absolutely right. For whatever else you can say about my photographs, they're highly resolved images that allow you an entry into the spaces they depict. What you said earlier, which I could only hope would be the case, is that you have access to an imagined space. Your imagination takes over aspects of these represented spaces and does with them what it will. I find that dynamic to be important. It's how the image becomes allegorical. By that I mean that you take these places out of the world and you relocate them in relationship not so much to the place itself but to the moment of your looking at the photograph. So an exchange occurs between you and the photograph, and it's an exchange that takes place in your imagination. But this is a process that's instigated by the facts of the photograph. By its ability to arrest time and reveal fragments of the world in excruciating detail.

**(13)RT: And perspective takes us by the hand, makes us feel comfortable. Or is comfortable the right word?**

**A:** Well, it is. I'm uncomfortable with you describing them as comfortable, but I think that is an appropriate word. It's a letting go at the moment of receiving the image made possible because the representation is stabilized in relationship to your body and to the act of looking. So you can kind of go there without feeling you're going to get mugged on the way. It's riskless looking. I think that one of the problems in my work—I guess in an interview one shouldn't let on that there are any problems—is that it can tend to look seamless. I'm interested in seams, in borders and edges. The irony is that as I make the scene more and more seamless I might eliminate the gaps. Or maybe the irony is more of a paradox in which the formalizing characteristics of the camera are expected to reveal it as artifice.

**(14)RT: Well, you're pushing the limits of your medium. And maybe you kind of miss the limits of the technique. In a video you've got the box and you see things that you tend not to in the photographs. You don't have the ragged edge of the photograph, or a reminder that it's you and your camera that took this.**

**DH:** You're right. My work isn't expressive in that way. But there are reminders. We've already talked about some of those. They're just not found in ragged edges. For example, there is a photograph that's in this show—the only one from the opera house series. Most of them are shot from the stage looking back toward the seats, bringing the perspective back to one point on the stage where the camera is situated. The one here, the opera house in Fano, is a diptych that was made by standing in the royal box looking toward the stage. Two shots were taken, swinging the camera off the central axis to the right and then to the left. The result is a diptych where perspective seems to fold back on itself, which, in turn, reminds you of the camera. Or at least it's supposed to.

**(16)RT:** Already in 1996 you perceived a "dark side" to the new technologies when you wrote "It is the computer's ability to treat all information, regardless of its content, as data, indiscriminately and non-hierarchically, that is both liberating and ominous." Would you comment on how you now view the "riskless looking" which seven years ago looked, at least in part, insidious and perverse? ("Thoughts on neighborhood Watch," in Photography after Photography).

**DH:** I was referring to the piece, *Neighborhood Watch* that came out of a photograph I had taken from a hill overlooking a housing project in a section of the Mission District in San Francisco. The piece consisted of 10 panels. The largest showed the entire scene: the central area of the housing project, a park with steel play structures in front, a parking lot, and the building and streets surrounding it. This was surrounded by the other panels that showed details of interactions that were going on between people within the main scene. These I made by scanning the transparency into my computer and then zooming into the image, enlarging sections that interested me. What struck me was how computer technology could enhance my already privileged view of the scene by allowing this second degree of scrutiny, carried out in my own studio without any risk to me whatsoever. I thought of this as riskless looking; as being in opposition to another way of looking that places one on the street at eye level with everyone else. Here you can be looked back at. Or interfered with. At the very least it's a looking for which one can be held accountable. The computer enhances technological looking by further removing the observer and reduces everything into data—digital code that can be endlessly manipulated or scrutinized for hidden information. I think it was this that I was identifying as the dark side of technology.

**(17)RT:** You remember the movie *Blow Up*?

**DH:** The secret photograph; or rather the photograph that contains the secret. The interesting thing in *Blow Up* is again the blurring between what the photograph reveals and what it conceals. There's the illusion that one can go deeper and deeper into an image to find truth. But the fact is that the further you venture, the less coherent the information becomes as it devolves into grain and pixels. My recollection of *Blow Up* is that the photograph can't solve the riddle of the dead body in the park and, in fact, only compounds it. Is the lesson that metaphysics reveals no truth because it, too, is founded on an illusion—the illusion that truth lies beneath appearances? At any rate, in *Blow Up* it seems that interpretation—for the characters that is— is impossible or at least extremely subjective.

**(18)RT:** Would you care to comment on the writers or other artists who have most stimulated your thinking?

**DH:** I do like to read and still find value in theory. It's provided a foundation that I can operate from and has given me the resources to remain interested. At the same time, I don't try to illustrate theory and am generally bored by work that does. Instead, I trust this foundation. Maybe in the way a musician has confidence that his fingers will find the right notes or that he'll bring appropriate phrasing to a difficult passage. I trust it enough

to forget about it when I'm working so that the work and I can have a conversation based on what's really going on rather than what I hope or wish was going on. Let's see, though, what have I been reading lately? I've been interested in Walter Benjamin for years. Recently, I've been trying, once again, to decode Theodor Adorno. I like Martin Jay's work a lot, particularly *Downcast Eyes*. His book on the Frankfurt School, *The Dialectical Imagination*, is terrific. Other contemporary authors include Jonathon Crary, Anthony Vidler, Victor Burgin. I also like fiction. Right now I'm reading Balzac's *Cousin Bette* and, staying in 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris, I'm looking forward to reading Victor Hugo who has somehow escaped me all these years. I love mystery novels, although one tends to blend into the other so I have trouble keeping their plots straight. Maybe this is because I fall asleep reading them in bed.

In terms of the influence of other artists: This may seem strange—because you know me as a photographer— but my formative influences include artists as disparate as Vito Acconci, Robert Morris, Smithson, Joan Jonas, and of course colleagues like the members of Ant Farm and other artists I collaborated with up until the late 70's like Jody Procter and Diane Andrews Hall. During these formative years I wasn't particularly influenced by photography. In all honesty, I was probably most influenced by the liberating chaos of the 60's. Within the last 15 years or so as my primary medium moved into photography, I've become knowledgeable about photography and photographers and try to stay informed about what's going on in both the US and Europe. Some of this work is compatible with my own interests and to that extent it is an influence. I'm glad to see the explosion of media based work over the past decade, including photography. Clearly I've benefited from this. On a more personal note, I have my own thoughts and a fairly extensive history of working as an artist so my work would probably take its own course regardless of what else was going on in the field. At the same time, the proliferation of photography raises the standards in terms of how work is evaluated and looked at critically and that in turn probably forces artists to do better work.