peter d'Agostino: interactivity &

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peter d'Agostino:
interactivity & intervention,
1978–1999

Robert Atkins,
Guest Curator

Lehman College Art Gallery
March 16 – May 15, 1999

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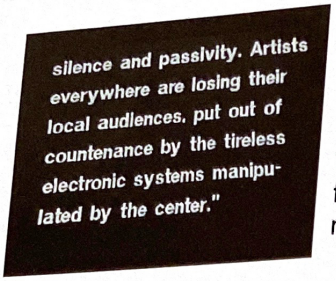
Foreword

We are pleased to present ***Peter d'Agostino: Interactivity and Intervention, 1978-1999*** as part of the *Bronx Celebrates*, a continuing series of exhibitions which features artists with Bronx roots. This exhibition is also offered as part of the gallery's ongoing examination of artists whose work incorporates new technologies as a medium for creating art. ***Peter d'Agostino: Interactivity and Intervention, 1978-1999***, organized by guest curator Robert Atkins, provides a survey of d'Agostino's work, highlighting five seminal installations created over the past twenty-one years. Referencing a range of sources from video games to mass media—the Internet, television and video—d'Agostino's installations are richly layered and both utilize and critique those electronic means we have become so dependent upon to know the world. This survey includes a new work, @Vesu.Vius, shown here for the first time. @Vesu.Vius draws its content from the broad expanse of Italian culture—history, philosophy, literature—and is played out against the specific, the immigration of d'Agostino's family from a small village near Naples to a new community in the Bronx. It is an examination of identity which is at once global and personal.

It has been a pleasure to work with Peter d'Agostino whose approach to all aspects of the project has been hands-on. We are pleased to have had the opportunity to present this exhibition to our audience and for this, we are very grateful to Robert Atkins for having brought this work to our attention. We would also like to thank Robert Atkins for his exceptional job in organizing this survey and for his essay which follows the threads of d'Agostino's career from the exploration of interactive television to the possibilities of the Internet.

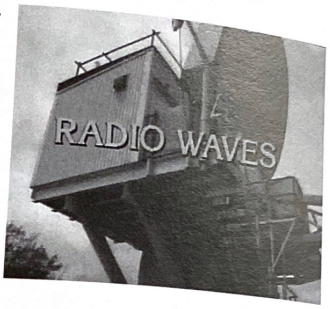
I would also like to thank the gallery staff, interns and volunteers for their part in realizing this project, particularly Mary Ann Siano for her help with the development work for this exhibition, Ada Pilar Cruz for her work with the education programs for the public schools, and Denise Mediavilla for her work as a designer and registrar. I would also like to thank the gallery's Board of Trustees for their support and particularly for their encouragement to explore new media in all aspects of the gallery work—from presenting exhibitions to long-distance education collaborations. The board's enthusiasm has made these programs possible.

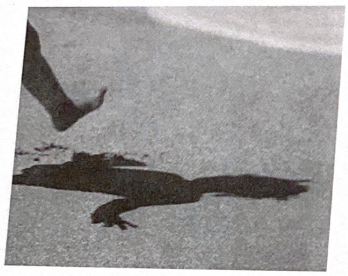
Susan Hoeltzel
Director, Lehman College Art Gallery



Proposal for QUBE (1978) was created as a response to the first commercial deployment of an interactive television service, Time Warner's QUBE. The installation comprises a video monitor playing d'Agostino's discussion of his original proposal and two cubes: a black one displaying "Quotes to QUBE" and a white one with "Quotes from QUBE." The former presents QUBE's inflated claims for its "product," and the latter raises issues about meaningful interactivity and the necessity of two-way communication systems.

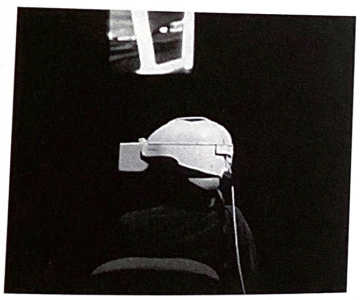
TransmissionS: In the WELL (1985-90) is an idiosyncratic history of a century of modern telecommunications and a cautionary tale of technological failure. Organized in five segments—*In the Beginning Was the S, Deus ex Machina, Parable, Generations,* and *Eclogues*—the **TransmissionS** videodisc evokes the achievements of electronic-era forebears, Thomas Edison, Nikola Tesla and Guglielmo Marconi, and represents a mythic technological "fall" from grace in both the death of an Italian boy who fell in a well and the fatal explosion of the Shuttle Challenger.

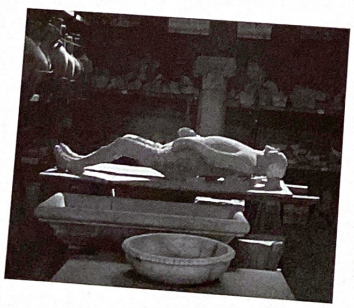




TRACES (1991-95) marks the 50th anniversary of the onset of the Atomic Age. D'Agostino's viewpoint is that of an American born between the secret atomic bomb test at Trinity Site, New Mexico, and the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, during the summer of 1945. On website and video, it presents images from the annual peace ceremonies in Hiroshima, historical footage and commentary about the bomb, didactic material about radiation, and d'Agostino's home movies.

VR/RV: a Recreational Vehicle in Virtual Reality (1993-94) was originally created as an interactive, virtual environment at the Banff Centre in Canada. On a drive in a recreational vehicle (RV), through a virtual reality (VR) theme park, **VR/RV** explores the displacement and disembodiment of a culture that conflates video games and the computerization of the Gulf War. It incorporates utopian visions and dystopic nightmares, along with images and sounds of the immersive environment itself—a head mounted display, data glove, and computer-generated projection.





@Vesu.Vius (1996-99) examines the many paradoxes of cultural identity and its metaphors. Iconic images of Mount Vesuvius and Pompeii are juxtaposed with places in the Italian-American community in the Bronx where d'Agostino was raised. Complemented by a web component—including a "live" camera trained on Mount Etna and other volcanoes in the region—the work proposes the necessity of moving beyond chauvinistic notions of ethnocentrism towards a "creative ethnicity."

Interactivity and Intervention: Peter d'Agostino's Art of Ideas

Robert Atkins

Although Peter d'Agostino has regularly exhibited his work throughout the eighties and nineties, this is the first survey of a sizable number of his video- and media-art installations. I have selected the five works—see work on the facing page—for their thematic resonance. Seeing d'Agostino's new work-in-progress, @VESU.VIUS, a meditation on his upbringing in the Bronx and his Italian ethnicity, provides both the special pleasure of discovery and comprises part of the gallery's on-going *Bronx Celebrates* series.

This essay is organized in rather unconventional fashion. I have described the work on the facing page in order to free the reader just as a list of characters and their relationships unburdened the readers of 19th century novels. Bear in mind that these are simply factual descriptions, akin to describing the Mona Lisa as "a small, bust-length portrait in oil of a smiling woman in front of a landscape." The essay that follows is a compendium of thoughts about specific aspects of d'Agostino's *modus operandi* and themes. My intentions are to make the artist's complex and thoughtful work accessible to gallery-goers and readers, and to make connections between individual works. (Incisive commentary by other writers also appears in the catalog alongside images of each work.) This approach reflects d'Agostino's own richly associative method of analogy and metaphor forcing viewers to make a variety of connections from sometimes fragmentary sets of ideas and images.

All the works in this exhibition are responses to new telecommunications and media-technologies. They employ many of our new technological formats and capabilities—including interactive videodisc, virtual reality, and the Internet—while critically analyzing their implications. They simultaneously explore public matters such as the role of the mass media in the construction of social reality, the fallout of the atomic age, and the de-humanization of the smart-bombing of the Gulf War, from a perspective that is both ethical and idiosyncratic. **TRACES** was inspired not only by existential concerns but by a reading of Roland Barthes[1] and by the fact that d'Agostino was born in July, 1945. The texture of d'Agostino's output is dense: In his art, more tends to be more.

This exhibition, in its entirety, can also be "read" as an installation piece, rather than five discrete, single works. In the digital age, a videotape can be reformatted for different kinds of output: projected on a wall or stored on a videodisc, viewed on a computer screen or on a video-monitor. **VR/RV: a Recreational Vehicle in Virtual Reality**, for instance, is projected on a gallery wall at the Lehman College Art Gallery, rather than experienced through a VR headset and gloves. To do so would have necessitated the acquisition of extraordinarily expensive hardware and the hiring of a full-time technician to assist visitors. D'Agostino, however, took this into account while making the piece; we see images of the headset and viewers experiencing the work as reminders of other ways the piece might be viewed and presented.

In a larger sense, every time d'Agostino shows his work, it is re-tailored, or "re-contextualized" (his term), for the new exhibition space. He regards a videotape or videodisc as a "database of information"[2] and each installation work as a site-specific project designed expressly for a particular exhibition site. "I am trying to 'survey' not fixed works but what [theorist] Umberto Eco has termed open works, that is texts open to many interpretations, including my own and those of viewers who will complete the works."[3] To do this may involve a change of format, as in showing **VR/RV** without a virtual reality headset, or subtler alterations of his video-data. To cite just one example of the latter in the current show, he has used a short video passage of a home movie from the video "database" of **TRACES** and transferred it to a loop that plays on a video monitor set in the gallery between two large video-projections of **TRACES** and @Vesu.Vius. It underlines the autobiographical meaning in both works of the Philadelphia-based artist returning home—in a variety of senses—to New York.

D'Agostino first exhibited **Proposal for QUBE** in 1978. As one of his early, mature works, it suggests that his interests in mass media, new technologies and multiple viewpoints had already crystallized.[4] Teaching in Dayton, Ohio, d'Agostino happened to be on hand for the debut of the first "interactive" cable television system, Time Warner's QUBE, in Columbus, Ohio. Subscribers to QUBE received a box to attach to the TV with five "response" buttons for, in QUBE-speak, "talking back to their television sets." QUBE programming included not just pay-per-view movies but original programs such as "How Do You Like Your Eggs?" for which the five buttons stood for scrambled, poached, sunny-side-up, soft-boiled, and hard-boiled.

Proposal for QUBE belongs to a series of videos from the seventies and early eighties highly critical of television-industry practices and consumerist ideology including Richard Serra's *Television Delivers People* (1973) and Chip Lord's *ABSCAM (Framed)* (1981). D'Agostino's proposal to QUBE was to produce a videotape determined in its final form, that is edited, on the basis of QUBE subscribers' interactive responses. Accepted by QUBE management and scheduled for cablecast, the initial work was bumped from the schedule and never re-inserted. Nor was d'Agostino ever provided with an explanation.[5]

Proposal for QUBE also reflects the emergence of

the now-familiar multi-media installation format. D'Agostino's method of creating physical installations incorporating video imagery augmented with texts, images and objects, rather than simply producing single-channel tapes for screenings, was typical of the late seventies.[6] Such an approach allows for the use of disparate elements and associations, which suggest the non-linearity and simultaneity of the CD-ROM. As an installation, **Proposal for QUBE** playfully toys with the concept of the modern gallery space as an idealized white cube, remote from the real world, an interpretation which was frequently invoked at the time as another assault on late-modernist purity.

D'Agostino's examination of interactive technology itself has also been prescient. He has interrogated interactive technologies in works including **TransmissionS**, which in its incarnation at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1990 utilized touch-screen technology that enabled viewers to access the work in non-linear fashion, and in **VR/RV**, shown at the Banff Centre for the Arts in Canada with virtual reality hardware in 1994. Contrary to popular opinion, interactivity did not arrive in the past decade with ATM machines and America Online.

What is interactivity? Its status as a buzzword of the nineties in connection with everything from electronic shopping to new art forms, obscures rather than clarifies its nature. Commercial, marketing considerations are largely responsible for this obfuscation; we are targeted by advertisers as participants in an ever expanding carnival of consumerism based on new products. But ordering a book online is only incrementally different from ordering a book over the phone; the telecommunications revolution began no later than the invention of the telephone a century ago. Nor do mouse-clicking or button-pushing represent the nature of interactivity, only a mechanical means of doing so. As d'Agostino observed about QUBE, it "seems to be presenting its unique apparatus—the computerized console—as its content."[7]

Interactivity is less a matter of ordering a stimulating book from Amazon.com, than of reading it. Interactivity is intimately allied in d'Agostino's mind with the creation of meaning. To explain his thinking, he employs the notion of the intervention. In an essay called *Interventions of the Present: Three Interactive Videodiscs, 1981-90*[8] he offers a dictionary definition of intervene as "to come between as an influencing force; to come in, to modify, settle, or hinder some action, argument, etc."[9] He then goes on to suggest that "art, like life, is an interactive experience. Like handprints on the walls of the caves of our prehistoric imagination, marks, images, and sounds all potentially intervene from the past to the present and from the present to the past."[10]

Historical continuity is a constant *leit motif* of d'Agostino's work. **TransmissionS**, for instance, embeds a tale of contemporary technological failure—the fatal inability of Italian authorities to free a boy trapped in a deep well, reinforced by images of the explosion of the Shuttle Challenger —in a series of episodes about the development of the camera obscura, the trans-Atlantic wireless transmission, and the reception of radio waves attributed to the origin of the universe over 15 billion years ago. (Talk about taking a long view!) Such schematic summaries can make d'Agostino's experimental, montage-like works seem far more linear than they actually are. In fact, the boy-in-the-well story is presented as a parable: the audio from authoritative sounding media descriptions is juxtaposed with the thoughtful commentary of Italian media-critic Adriano Apra, who is seen on screen, talking at length. Apra tells us that there was nothing to see or hear from the full-time, live television coverage of the tragedy taking place 200' underground, so it "let me dream." (D'Agostino repeats his interview with Apra twice in the videodisc—once as a disembodied voice heard over TV "snow"—reinforcing its dreamy, otherworldly quality.) The mid-1980s event became a curious *tabula rasa* on which Italians projected.their anxieties about the

economy, as if Italian resolve and efficacy itself were at stake.

When d'Agostino presented the work at the Philadelphia Museum in 1990, his installation, **In the WELL**, was "contextualized" by the museum's famous room-size installation-work by Marcel Duchamp, *Etants Donnés* (1946-66), which can only be viewed through a glass peephole in the wooden door that separates artwork and viewer. For his installation, d'Agostino had a cylindrical structure reminiscent of a well constructed in the museum space. Three methods of accessing the work were installed facing out toward viewers and contiguous with the structure's wall: an interactive, touch screen linked to a "data base" of the entire work; a monitor playing the interview with Apra; and a literal "peephole" revealing three video images of peepholes—one in a Roman garden opening onto St. Peter's, Duchamp's peephole, and an eye—the boy's?—which gazes back at the voyeuristic viewer. Additionally, circular images of the boy in the well, his family and the rescue attempts, were projected onto the gallery's ceiling. An imaginary corridor joined d'Agostino's work with Duchamp's work; it was delineated by wonderfully absurd references to Duchamp on the **TransmissionS** video in the form of artist Beatrice Wood recounting her long-ago meeting with Duchamp and swallowing a live fly during their initial conversation. Yet again, "marks, images and sounds...intervene from the past to the present and from the present to the past."

To intervene, then, is not just a process, but d'Agostino's world view, his *modus operandi,* his artistic method. As an artist who also studied visual anthropology, he presents varied kinds of information or data in his works: media accounts of events recorded from television news, the interpretation of analysts and critics, footage of contemporary happenings and everyday life and locales, culturally-specific music and sounds, as well as, in the cases of **TransmissionS**, **TRACES** and @VESU.VIUS, seemingly personal material such as his family's home movies from the fifties.

TRACES, for instance, presents riveting imagery from documentary footage of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, unforgettable commentary from J. Robert Oppenheimer, one of the "fathers" of the a-bomb ("I remember lines from the Hindu scripture: Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds"), d'Agostino's tapes of the annual, commemorative peace ceremonies at Hiroshima, and the sound of Buddhist chanting and drumming, to name only some of the elements. (D'Agostino has also created an online database of mostly factual supporting material ranging from testimonials of Hiroshima survivors and information about radiation effects, to links to relevant non-profit organizations' sites.) The work, however, is anything but a conventional documentary. Images of water—suggesting the flow and passage of time—abound. The video begins with floating paper lanterns, a ritual element of the annual peace ceremonies in Hiroshima, includes images of a life jacket on a ferry boat in Nagasaki, and concludes with leis floating on the water above the submerged USS Arizona in Pearl Harbor. **TRACES** suggests that each of us must come to terms with such complex events—no simple matter. Interestingly, even the autobiographical material, the blurry footage of home movies, is less personal than generic. Unlabelled it stands in for the shared experiences of viewers who grew up in the pre-home-video fifties and sixties.

The critical detachment that underlies d'Agostino's "open texts" is shared by the great German playwright of the early 20th century, Bertolt Brecht. The modernist playwright attempted to bend the naturalistic theater conventions of his day in order to promote social change. To undermine what he regarded as the overly seductive effects of a theater based on catharsis and the emotional involvement of audiences with actors, he employed his *verfremdungseffekt* or alienating effects:[11]

A character might speak directly to the audience or slides of escalating food prices might be flashed on stage. Such effects were intended to open minds by disrupting familiar narratives in order to "free socially-conditioned phenomena from that stamp of familiarity which protects them against our grasp today." It's difficult to imagine a better description of d'Agostino's intentions, as well.

Just as interactivity is a key buzzword of the early nineties, virtuality is emerging as the buzzword of choice for the turn of the 21st century. The virtual is most simply defined as the non-material equivalent of the actual, physical world. A virtual chat room on a website may be nothing more than the equivalent of a face-to-face conversation at a party or coffee house—if you can imagine a conversation with someone you've never met whose body language and expressions you'll never see. In a more complex sense, it suggests the possibility of a future in which digital reality complements, or even replaces, many familiar activities of the physical world.

Along with many other technologically-enabled phenomena, 'virtuality' has ramifications which d'Agostino has long been pondering. In **Proposal for QUBE** he quotes then Warner Cable chairman Gustave M. Hauser extolling the virtues of QUBE: "What we have here is an electronic superhighway. You name it—we can do it."[12] Hauser's use of such up-to-date sounding terminology in 1978 is startling. And yet another reminder that technological and social change are usually long in the making; the boundaries of the present are relative and tend to stretch back further than we think.

D'Agostino first used a website in connection with **TRACES**. Although I have mentioned his use of the **TRACES** site as a vehicle for presenting supporting, informational material, the site actually functions in more complex fashion. One part of it, called *Installation* offers a "slide show" of photos that complement the show's video component with images such as the *LIFE* magazine cover for July 30, 1945, the day after d'Agostino was born. The picture, for a story called "Playing with Shadows" depicts a child about to step on his own shadow. This feel-good image retrospectively takes on an ominous significance vis-á-vis the bombs that were dropped on Japan and even the magazine's name. (D'Agostino has also used details from the *LIFE* magazine cover-image as large-scale, digital prints mounted on the walls of previous exhibition venues. Three of the nine prints are in the Lehman installation.)

If the **TRACES** website is another way of providing viewers with additional interventions, **VR/RV** is different: It places virtuality at the center of d'Agostino's thematic concerns. The development of Virtual Reality Markup Language (VRML)—the means of programming or creating virtual environments—may eventually be regarded as a landmark advance of the early nineties. But despite the relentless hype, its potential currently remains largely unexplored outside of the entertainment and video game industries.

Virtual reality formats can range from a simple, computer-screen variant by which viewers might navigate through a simulated architectural (or gallery) space using the up-and-down keys on their keyboards, to the immersive form, which attempts to simulate complex sensations through the use of a digital headset and gloves. Not surprisingly it is the latter version to which d'Agostino was drawn. Its very existence posits an alternative reality as dramatic as scuba diving might seem to the uninitiated. (Nonetheless, this extraordinarily expensive technology can only be experienced in limited doses; after 15 minutes some people suffer from headaches, dizziness or other symptoms of disorientation.) If a future of virtual reality awaits us, will it provide a host of situations or locales to be experienced from the comfort of our living rooms? And what are the implications of such programmed experiences? **VR/RV** asserts that these possibilities ought to be considered now.

D'Agostino's title suggests his attitude toward this

new technology. The RV (recreational vehicle) can allude to both recreation, in the form of entertainment-industry appropriation of new technological formats (often developed by the military) for trivial purposes, and the recreational vehicle, a democratic, even working class means of travelling whose owners can hardly be considered part of the technocratic elite. By contrast, two of the four "destinations" (referred to as East, West, Mid-East and Far-East) that "driver-viewers" of the RV can choose are Hiroshima and Kuwait City (via Baghdad), on which atomic and "smart" bombs were respectively dropped. Throughout the Gulf War, CNN viewers frequently saw potential targets imaged on computer screens that uncannily resembled video games and actually employed game technology. In the digital age, the military-industrial complex of the fifties might well be replaced by the military-entertainment state.

The picture of virtual reality that d'Agostino offers is not a pretty one. It is bleak and generic—a schematic, graphic rendering of our visually textured world. In contrast, the video imagery that occasionally appears seems richly nuanced. It comes in two forms: as imagery that can be interactively accessed on billboards and on a small "dashboard" screen that seems like a navigational device. Both include color and black and white footage of motoring through the natural splendors of the Rockies, and the burning oilfields and devastation caused by "smart bombing" in Iraq. The dashboard footage also refers to McLuhan's interventions-like notion of television as a rear-view window. As d'Agostino put it, we move "forward in the vehicle while looking back at the past...some of the sounds and images [pictured] intermingle events from the past, present and into the future."[13]

D'Agostino's panorama of future, virtual states is unsettling, while **VR/RV**'s collaged sound is appealing, albeit disconcertingly jumpy. The sound track contains fragments of audio, reminiscent of the station-hopping familiar to anyone who's taken a long-distance drive. We hear the sounds of kids playing, news, police and ambulance sirens, the folk song *500 Miles*, and snatches of John Coltrane and Jimmy Hendrix, Buddhist and Native American chants, and the Islamic call to prayer. The audio track shouldn't be considered background; the central idea of the work is invoked in it—linguist George Lakoff's observation that "Intelligence is natural and it has to do with the body and the way we're embodied."[14] In other words, nature—ourselves included—isn't likely to soon be replaced by technology, that is artificial intelligence. Just as the French government's recent creation of a tourist-accessible facsimile of the fragile paleolithic, painted caves of Lascaux is only a simulation, so, too, is virtual reality. Are we to be the spectators of our own lives?

Agency and responsibility are also sub-texts of d'Agostino's most recent work, **@Vesu.Vius**. The situation this work confronts is, again, ethical: How do we treat others who are unlike us? The urgency of the problem is clear: Whether embodied in "ethnic cleansing" in the former Yugoslavia or in current debates in the United States (and elsewhere) about immigration and citizenship—what might be termed multi-culturalism—ethnic and racial differences divide and endanger us. Instead of cherishing such differences, they have been exploited to spectacular effect by demagogues who have made the 20th century notable for an unprecedented number of refugees as products of intra-national conflicts. As the 21st century rapidly approaches, the numbers have only grown larger.

On his website for **@Vesu.Vius**, d'Agostino makes a connection between this inhumanity and technology. He has written: "As we approach the twenty-first century, technological changes threaten to accelerate the eradication of cultural difference...@Vesu.Vius moves beyond chauvinistic notions of ethnocentrism, toward a 'creative ethnicity,' with the realization that 'Ethnicity is made of a community that is cultural and

psychological, not necessarily geographic'."[15] Anybody who is part of a geographically dispersed, online community—of Zen Buddhists, breast cancer sufferers, tomato growers, gay men, or body surfers—instinctively understands that (s)he belongs to a (sub)culture that provides meaning to his or her life. Our identities are not just fluid but multiple.

In @VESU.VIUS, d'Agostino examines his own, Italian-American ethnicity. His parents (and three of his six siblings) were born in a small town near Naples and Vesuvius. He was brought up in an Italian-American neighborhood in the Bronx, where some family members remain. Mount Vesuvius is a resonant symbol for Southern Italians—and Western Europeans in general. It is perhaps the most written about, the most acculturated feature of the natural landscape in Western history. The oldest extant eye-witness account of a natural disaster is Pliny the Younger's description of the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 AD, which buried Pompeii and Herculaneum. But it wasn't merely the proximity of literate societies to this remarkable phenomenon that has historically inspired such interest, it was the awe-inspiring phenomenon itself: A mountain that periodically spewed out its molten interior in a destructive and Hellish discharge that could not be anticipated.

As with **TRACES**, @VESU.VIUS is presented in a three-part installation: Projected video on the gallery wall, video on a wall-mounted "plasma screen" and a website augmented by live-video cameras trained on volcanoes in the region of Mount Etna, the active volcano in Sicily. (Sicily and Naples were frequently joined throughout history; and often controlled by outsiders.) Where the "web cam" offers live images of the volcanoes, the projected video loops offer footage of Vesuvius and Pompeii, in a variety of forms ranging from snippets of a black-and-white documentary of the 1944 eruption to contemporary footage of tour guides leading visitors around the much-visited archeological site. Images of ancient corpses preserved by lava are startlingly reminiscent of modern bodies seen in footage of Hiroshima, projected on a nearby gallery wall. On his website, d'Agostino makes the connection explicit by quoting a recent magazine-essay: "Unlike most of civilization's turning points, which arrive on cat's feet and insinuate themselves gradually into people's consciousness, the atomic bomb was history announcing itself like Vesuvius."[16]

On a the plasma screen d'Agostino presents everyday images of the Bronx, including a now unused marquee of the Loew's Paradise movie theater, and the thriving Arthur Avenue produce market. At the market, he verbally spars with a grocer who says "Non se Napolitano" ("You're not Neapolitan."). What does it mean to go home again? Every adult must consider this question.

In one of the video's most poignant shots, d'Agostino holds his camera on a "no entrance" sign posted at one part of the ongoing excavations at Pompeii. The past is both sealed off to us and yet—based on the contemporary looking lifestyles and layout of ancient Pompeii—seems close at hand. It is a telling reminder that the we must simultaneously accomodate the past and acknowledge a complex present. D'Agostino suggests that reconciliation is a vital, creative act.

***Robert Atkins** is a New York-based art historian, writer and media producer interested in the relationship of art and technology. He is the founding editor of* TalkBack! A Forum for Critical Discourse, *the first American online journal about online art.*

NOTES

1 In *Empire of Signs*, Barthes wrote (and d'Agostino reproduces in *TRACES)*: "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'."

2 From an email interview with the author conducted on December 16, 1998.

3 Ibid.

4 This process of crystallization took place in the late seventies, not only with *Proposal for QUBE*, but with the concurrent *ALPHA, TRANS, CHUNG* (1976-78) and *Comings and Goings* (1977-79).

5 The history of artists working with mainstream television is, in part, a chronicle of bad faith: Other artists have been treated similarly. Antonio Muntadas, for example, was commissioned to create a behind-the-scenes look at television production for Spanish television, which it neither aired, nor offered an explanation for refusing to do so.

6 From a strictly formal viewpoint, his work should be seen alongside those of other pioneering video-installation-makers including the Ant Farm Collective, Juan Downey, Frank Gillette, Bruce Nauman, and Nam June Paik.

7 Peter d'Agostino, *TeleGuide: Including Proposal for QUBE*, NFS Press, San Francisco, 1980, p 15.

8 "Interventions of the Present: Three Interactive Videodiscs, 1981-90," in *Illuminating Video*, Hall and Fifer (eds), Aperture Press, New York, 1990.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 For a fuller discussion of the connections between Brecht and d'Agostino see my "Brechtian Dialectics Applied," in Peter d'Agostino, *Comings and Goings*, NFS Press, San Francisco, 1982, pp 62-69.

12 *TeleGuide*, op. cit., p 15.

13 From an email interview with the author, conducted on December 14, 1998.

14 Lakoff, co-author of *Metaphors We Live By*, believes that artificial intelligence is oxymoronic. From an email interview between d'Agostino and the author, December 21, 1998.

15 Richard Gambino, *Blood of My Blood: The Dilemma of the Italian Americans*, Guernica Press, New York, 1996.

16 Gerard Parshall, "Shockwave," *US News and World Report*, July 31, 1995, p. 45.

Proposal for QUBE

Peter d'Agostino

"It's those blank TV and movie screens that interest me most. When they're turned off, there's never a trace—no evidence of what has transpired. Their effects on consciousness is only a matter of literary speculation."[1]

Proposal for QUBE was presented as part of a series of one-person exhibitions, titled "Six in Ohio," at Ohio State University's Sullivant Gallery, October 20–November 11, 1978.

Designed as a video installation piece, the videotape incorporated in the work was scheduled to be cablecast on QUBE prior to the exhibition. QUBE, as you may know by now, is the first commercial application of two-way "interactive" cable-TV technology. Located in Columbus, Ohio, home of college football's Buckeyes and Woody Hayes, the team's former controversial coach, this city is also a major consumer test-market for products and surveys.

The "interactive" system available to QUBE subscribers takes the form of a console attached to the television set that enables the home viewer to "participate" in selected programs by pushing one of five "response" buttons. (In a recent program titled "How Do You Like Your Eggs?" the five buttons stood for scrambled, poached, sunny-side up, soft-boiled, and hard-boiled.) Once activated, the console feeds a central computer and the results of the home response are flashed on the screen. (Here forty-eight percent of the homes had pressed the scrambled button.) This is how viewers are "talking back to their television sets."

For my gallery exhibition, two cubicles were built: one, a viewing space for the continuous video playback. Adjacent to it was an exhibition space for two sets of panels displaying "Quotes to" and "Quotes from" QUBE. The quotations "from QUBE" had appeared in the national press and were primarily responsible for generating a highly utopian attitude concerning "two-way" cable in Columbus; the quotations "to QUBE" were an attempt on my part to create a dialogue raising some of the obvious questions concerning this kind of system and its possible application.

Proposal for QUBE was conceived as a theoretical model of two-way communication based on a dialogue. The response mechanism in the form of the dialectic employed in "Quotes to" and "from" QUBE was extended into the content of the videotape and the method in which it was to be cablecast.

Quotes from QUBE

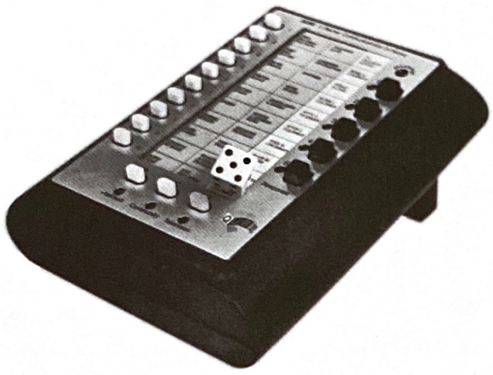
"...the name QUBE doesn't stand for anything, but was chosen because it rhymes with "tube" and because it suggests "something that is distinctive and futuristic without being scary."[2]

"We're bambambam. You jump around. You bounce. You play QUBE."[3]

Quotes to QUBE

"It is generally believed that modern communication systems must inevitably destroy all local cultures. This is because these systems have largely been used for the benefit of the center and not as two-way streets. Today, unchecked mass communication bullies and shouts humanity into silence and passivity. Artists everywhere are losing their local audiences, put out of countenance by the tireless electronic systems manipulated by the center."[4]

The tape contains five segments ranging from theoretical concerns to everyday events and are in the form of: a text, a newspaper, a photograph, a film, and a video performance. After sampling a portion of each of the five segments, the home audience would, by the consensus of their response, determine the sequencing of the tape and see the results of this process. (Five segments-1 through 5-would yield 120 possible variations for editing the final tape.) Aside from the apparent novelty of producing a videotape edited by a public opinion poll, I wanted to confront two central issues relative to communication and information systems—namely, feedback and ideology.

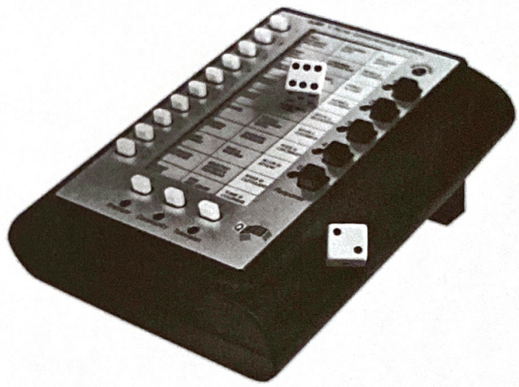


"Feedback," using Norbert Weiner's definition, is "a method of controlling a system by reinserting into it the results of its past performance,a learning process with the ability "to change the general method and pattern of performance."[5]

The present methods employed by QUBE limits feedback to the mere illusion of participation. As in McLuhan's *The Medium is the Message*, participation is defined solely by the formal properties of the medium-rather than its content: "The mosaic form of the TV image demands participation and involvement," while "Literacy in contrast conferred the power of detachment and non-involvement." Applying McLuhanesque jargon in statements such as "We are entering the era of participatory as opposed to passive television."[6] QUBE seems to be presenting its unique apparatus-the computerized console-as its content. "What we have here is an electronic superhighway. You name it-we can do it."[7]

A problem relative to this attitude is expressed in QUBE's policy towards public access: "Our local shows in effect is public access, but we organize it."[8] Redefining access on these terms, in fact, limits public participation.

This pre-packaging of media access provided by QUBE with its "newspeak" terminology such as "Qubit" and "Qubsumer" reminds me of a scenario from Ray Bradbury's novel *Fahrenheit 451* which concerns a futuristic two-way TV system: "They mailed me my part this morning. I sent in some box-tops. They write the script with one part missing. It's a new idea." "And then they go on with the play until he says, 'Do you agree to that, Helen?'and I say, 'I sure do!' Isn't that fun, Guy."



Don't send in any box-tops. Active participation is essential. However, each media or method has its own ideological implications.

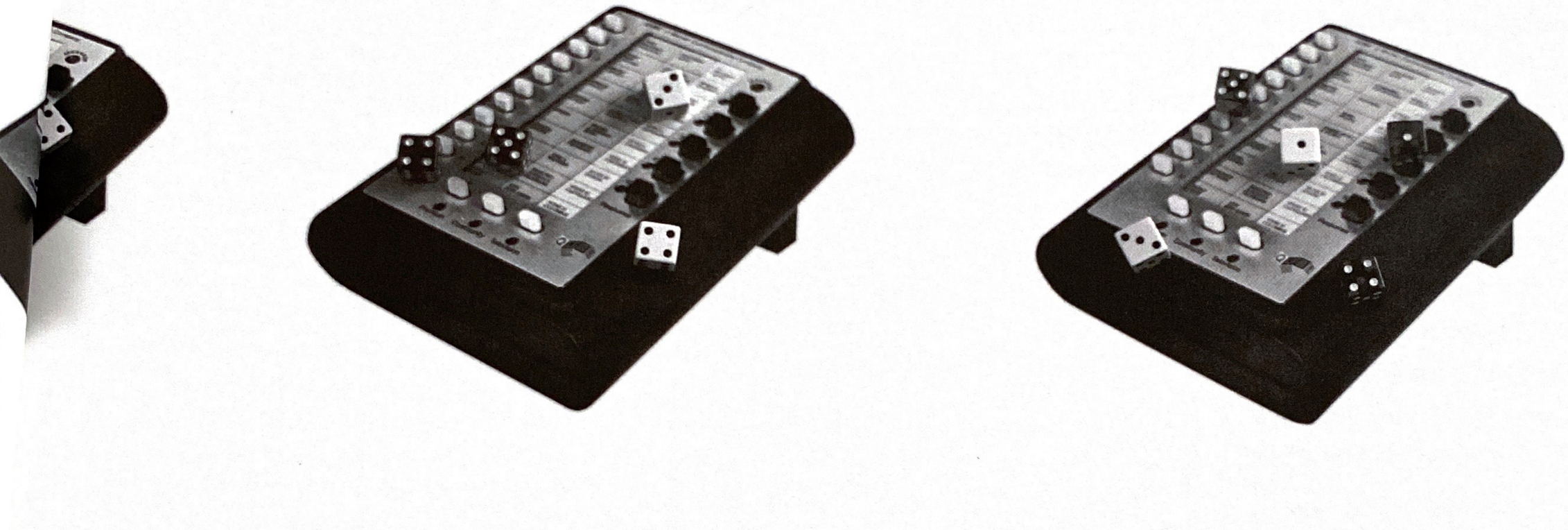
The apparatus itself creates the first level of meaning. Additional information like 'Helen's response' can be virtually meaningless. Demystification is the first step. What is two-way cable TV? How is it being programmed?

Although **Proposal for QUBE** was scheduled for cablecasting on October 13,1978, it was canceled, I was told, due to "special programming" on the station. On November 22, after waiting a month, I sent a letter to QUBE requesting a new date for my program. As we approach the beginning of March, 1979, I'm still waiting for a "response."

Postscript

It's January, 1980. I'm sitting here in my studio in Yellow Springs, Ohio, looking into a gray winter sky and reflecting on my past experience with QUBE. Some things have changed since the preceding comments. QUBE has undergone some personnel changes, including a new program director. I also read of a recent collaborative project with WGBH, Boston, and of SoHo Television's four-week series of artists'programming on QUBE. The Reading experiment is clearly a model for serving some important community needs. While at QUBE, can the recent attempts in experimental arts programming lead the way for more community involvement? Some serious questions remain.

"We can be precise. The factors are in the animal and/or the machine the factors are communicaton and/or control both involve the message. And what is the message?"[10] Stay tuned?



On the other hand, my "theoretical model" for two-way cable was expanded and later shown at the Long Beach Museum. My present concerns have shifted somewhat to certain practical aspects of two-way cable transmission.

Additional research into the development of a "practical model" has led me to the following information regarding a community-based two-way cable system. The project was undertaken by New York University and three neighborhood communication centers (NCC) in Reading, Pennsylvania, with a grant from the National Science Foundation. Its premise was to "demonstrate the potential for communication technology to reinforce community consciousness."[9] Components of the project included: two-way interactive capability, public initiated programs from neighborhood facilities, and an emphasis on serving distinct sub-groups within the population—in this case, senior citizens. After the initial experimental period, a non-profit corporation, Berks Community TV (BCTV) was formed to assume responsibility for the system. Reports indicate it is still operational and growing.

Notes:

1. Part of my statement for the catalog: "Six in Ohio," Ohio State University, Gallery of Fine Art, 1978.
2. From a statement by OUBE president Lawrence B.Hilford in "Can't Stand the Show? TV Gadget Lets Viewers Rule," Detroit Free Press, December 1, 1977.
3. From a statement by QUBE programming vice-president Harlan Kleiman in "Brave New World of Television," New Times, July 24,1978.
4. Alan Lomax, "Appeal for Cultural Equity," Joumal of Communication, Spring, 1977.
5. Norbert Weiner, The Human Use of Human Beings.
6. From a statement by Warner Cable chairman Gustave M. Hauser, "Talking to the Tube," Newsweek, December 5,1977.
7. From a statement by Gustave M. Hauser, "Brave New World of Television," New Times, July 24, 1978.
8. Gustave M. Hauser, "Two-Way Cable Poised for Major Test in Columbus," Broadcasting, November 21, 1977.
9. Mitchell L. Moss, "Two-Way Cable Television: A Community Communication System, Public Tele-communications Review, Vol. 6, No. 6, Nov./Dec., 1978.
10. Charles Olson, "The Kingfishers."

Constructing Visions: The Boy in the WELL

Peter d'Agostino's installation concerns a boy, Alfredo Eno, who fell into a well in Italy over a decade ago at the deepest point of an economic depression. The more the growing number of people gathering outside the well tried to rescue him, the deeper he fell. There are other "children in a well" stories one could cite since the advent of live press coverage, like the accident of Jessica McClintock, or the death of another girl in Los Angeles during the earliest days of local television coverage after WWII. The idea of a child falling into a well appears to have deep psychological resonance. Something symbolic, beyond the individual fate of the child, appears to be at stake in attracting a massive and live presence of the media and the widest concern and sympathy in the public imagination. The tragic outcome of the rescue attempt in Italy was widely regarded as a symbolic point in the life of a country, helpless at an economic nadir—nothing could get worse. Things could only get better, and, as we know, they did.

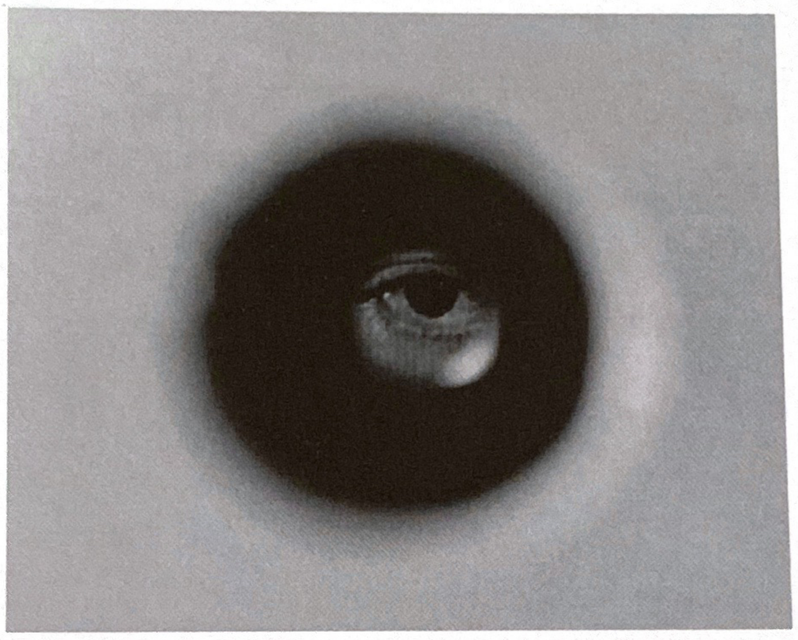
D'Agostino's installation is organized around a large cylinder—the well—to which there is no access. Around the column, four different apparatuses for controlling vision—ironically of what is in essence invisible—are arranged. Only two apparatuses can be seen immediately by the visitor: a video monitor "broadcasts" an interview with Adriano Apra, an Italian film producer and intellectual, who interprets the story of the boy in the well. Apra's interview is interwoven with a montage of transmission towers, which relay the story, murmuring partly intelligible sounds in several languages about the boy in the well.

The montage of towers and senders, a circa three minute loop, moves in and out of static and "snow," or the grain of empty transmission itself.

The other apparatus, above the monitor on the ceiling, is a round video projection showing a much shorter cycle of still images of the boy and of his family and other personages at the well head. The circle of projection closes into a digitized still photo of the boy to the point that it appears as moving chaos, that is, as if the grain of the photo, the halftones of the press image or the pixels of the computer had decayed into the pure noise and snow of transmission itself.

The visitor who peers around the huge cylinder or "well" discovers another

apparatus on either side: the peephole was
the most popular "interface" in
the installation in Philadelphia, and the
voyeuristic apparatus of the
male gaze also has the longest Western
history. In the video at the
peephole, we find an overlay of three
different other peephole events:
first, an image through the well known
historical peephole in the gate of the
Piranesi garden
in Rome, revealing a view of St. Peter's;
second,
the peephole of Marcel
Duchamp's secret,
Etants Donnés (1946-66), on view
in another part of the
Philadelphia Museum. And, the
third and last event
is an eye that seems
to look back at the
spectator/Peeping Tom.
The eye
seemed to me to be the gaze of the boy in
the well, but it could be any
eye, including the spectator's. The image of
the eye betrays the intention
of the installation not to see, so much as to
see this apparatus for
constructing and controlling vision.



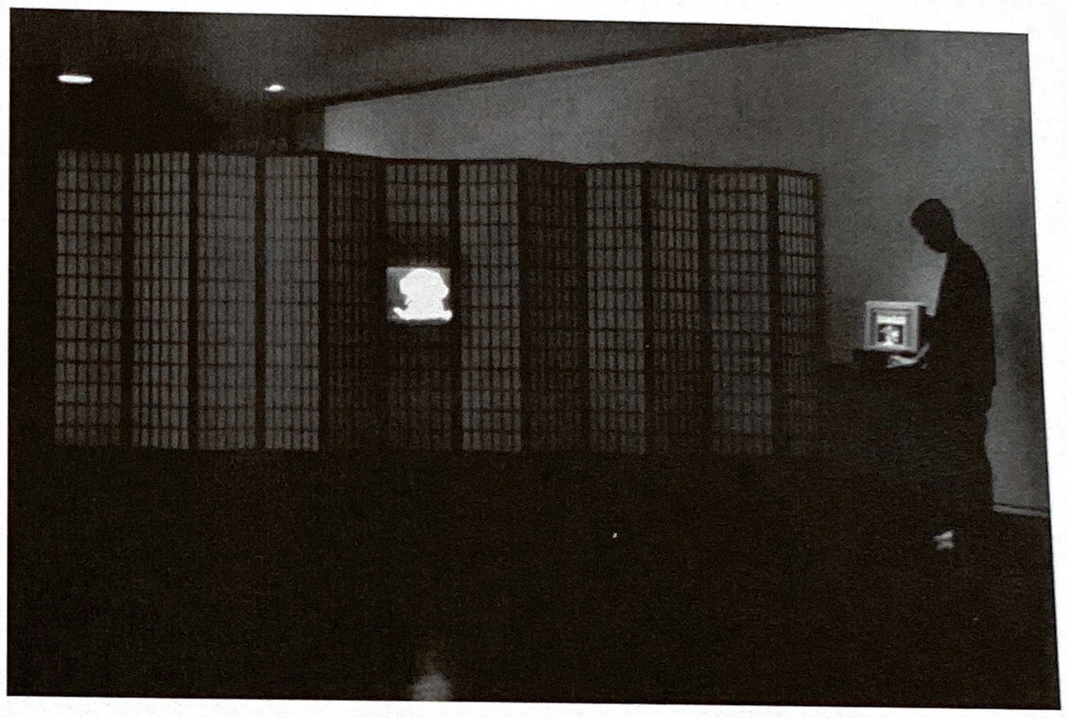
The other "interface" is a touchcreen, the
next most engaging to visitors,
judging from their interaction with it. The
screen is programmed to
play 64 chapters in the TransmissionS
database according to where and ,
how the visitor touches it: in the center or
on the edges and with quick
hits or with one touch. In this way, the touch
mode corresponds to the
feedback mode of the images: rapid touch
or quick hits get quick chapters;
one touch plays a chapter to the end
and quits.
D'Agostino regards touch
here as a metaphor so, the differentiation
of touches and effects as ways
of entering a scene serves to make touch
itself apparent as a means of
transmission and event
construction.
Ultimately, none of the
sophisticated technology used to
attempt his
rescue and to disseminate
information at the scene of the
boy in the well
could save him. His story is
itself the only residue of the
accident, a story which
restores an irremediable and meaningless
event into a tragic
and human fate. By turning contemporary
media technology around onto
itself, this installation does not attempt to
reveal the reality of either
the event or the technology. It rather honors
the work of the imaginary in
confrontation with loss in a contingent and
human construction.

Margaret Morse *is a professor of critical theory and electronic culture at the University of California, Santa Cruz. She has publised art criticism on a variety of genres focusing on video, installations and virtual environments.*

TransmissionS: In the WELL

First Encounters: Intersections of Meaning and Medium in Peter d'Agostino's Installations

David Tafler



An interactive installation raises the challenge of configuring an encounter and anticipating the potential range of experience it embodies. It foregrounds the pathways surrounding the reception of events and intensifies the desire to recuperate those events as part of a total configuration that has no final shape. D'Agostino's work probes the parameters of that exchange. Each installation operates on a metalevel deconstructing meaning in light of the medium used to stitch together events. Each work reconstructs the viewer as a participant in the production of that meaning. The viewer-participant self-directs his or her attention in the process of making connections.

In **TRACES**, exhibited in 1995, d'Agostino begins the process of deconstructing an historic vision by resurrecting it with tangential fragments edited and tightly reconstructed within a gallery installation. Using two monitors, each facing out from opposite sides of a V-shaped wall formed by Shoji, Japanese style folding screens, **TRACES** connects two unrelated series of events that took place in July and August of 1945: the development and implementation of the atomic bomb, and the birth of the artist. Bridging trans-Pacific perspectives, the double monitor installation compresses fifty years of the artist's experience living under the nuclear umbrella. Life and death cycles—from the devastation and rebirth of Hiroshima to the scarred and declining neighborhoods of the artist's birthplace in East Harlem, provide a footprint of the artist's life under the umbrella formed by the memories and references that define his existence.

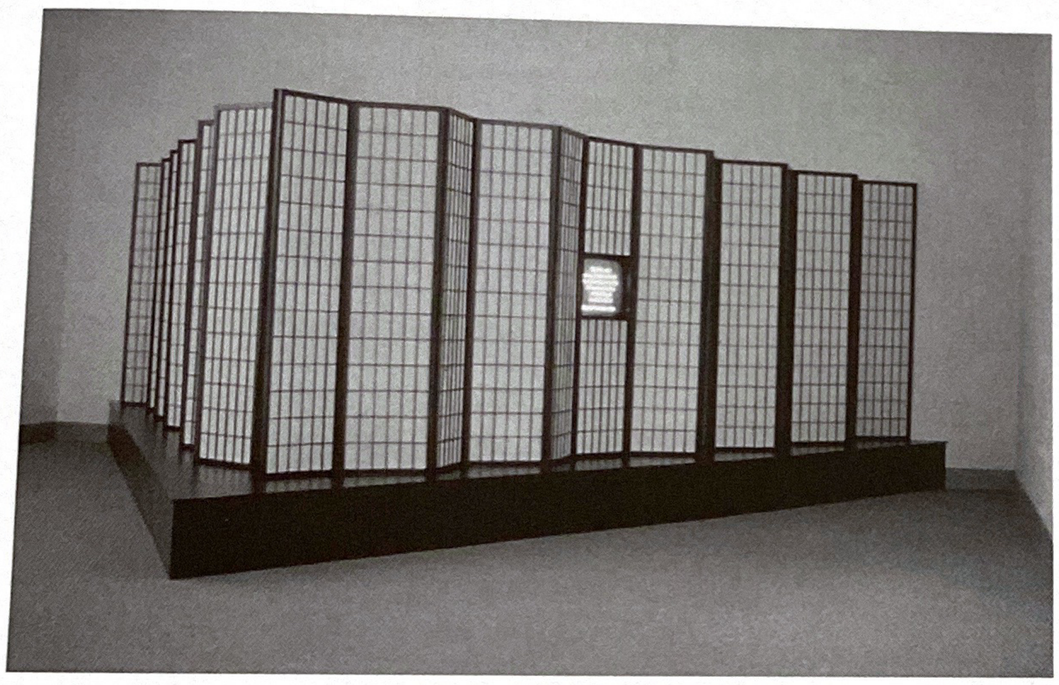
The first monitor projects a recurring mantra of Buddhist chanting and floating lanterns recorded during the annual peace ceremonies in Hiroshima. The loop on the second monitor reveals: father of the bomb Oppenheimer expressing his regret, quoting from the Bhagavad Gita; a view from the Enola Gay of the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima; an annual die-in, staged every year on the anniversary of the bomb in modern Hiroshima; excerpts of a recent tour of Nagasaki Harbor; images of floating wreaths and inscribed names at the Arizona Memorial at Pearl Harbor; and a series of shots capturing the New York neighborhood where d'Agostino grew up. The sound of the chanting from one monitor overlaps with that coming from the other in the ambiance of the installation. The chanting on the electronic screen mixes with the other sounds, the conversations, exclamations, chants, and any other spontaneous performance that may take place in the surrounding space.

TRACES forms a string that brings together discreet lives building an intertextual moment, a metonymic database, breaking through the barriers that separate Hiroshima from The Bronx, Napoli, and New York. Capturing the half century, **TRACES** represents the associations that form on the other side. The viewer looks inward at fragments of memory scavenged from a collective history and a personal reminiscence.

On the precipice of the new information matrix, **TRACES** does not exist simply in a given gallery environment. It has a parallel portal on the web which links to Green Peace's anti-nuclear campaigns and to other related sites, many of them in Japan. Figurative ties bind the electronic links. The birth of a child, the cataclysmic dawn of the atomic age, anticipates the concurrent construction of new ties and the rupture of others. The birth, a latent explosion, and the bomb, a foreboding creation, fragment linear history into a realm of possibilities and disappointments that co-exist along multiple pathways.

At the turn of the century, uncertainty became probability. Freud reinvented psychology by defining and charting the unconscious. Physics went from explaining empirical absolutes to dwelling on statistical projections that lie beyond the senses. At the conclusion of that same century, probability has the opportunity to sow uncertainty in the scheme of events embodied by a text.

TRACES freezes the phantoms. Capturing moments from childhood processed through fifty years of life goes beyond language, beyond



unravelling memories. Memories, the forgotten figures, like the quark particles, an invisible but integral part of nature, forge the unseen strings between parallel events rendering meaning in the synaptic associations. Rescuing those associations from oblivion, **TRACES** moves from shadows to photographs to fragments of sound. The overlapping simultaneity joins the different people living their different lives in distant places.

Fifty years come and go, another cycle begins. With the contemplative respite past, other hyper-theoretical projects seek to recuperate a simple vision from the blinding light of the atomic age. D'Agostino's ***STRING CYCLES***, a project begun in 1989, a project perpetually in progress, works with enduring storytelling traditions. In ***STRING CYCLES***, those traditions temporarily reside in the media of the moment. Most recently on CD-ROM, its recorded passages explore the process of narration. Master storytellers recant select anecdotes, fables, myths. D'Agostino weaves the fragments of those different narrators, who come from different cultural perspectives, into the universal mantras of our common experience. When captured and rendered, the spoken word inscribes its own dimensions.

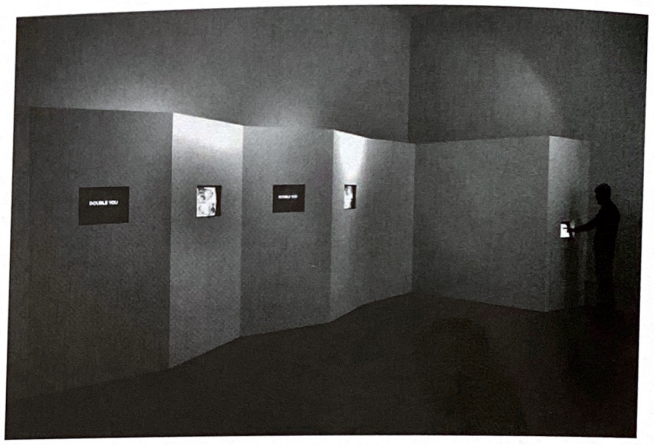
In 1987, in a gallery housing d'Agostino's installation ***DOUBLE YOU (and X,Y,Z)***, a man, a narrator of sorts, sat down in the middle of the room and began chanting. His live performance accompanied the images and sounds coming from the four monitors situated on a zig-zag, "W" shaped center panel, along the front wall. During this spectacle, an individual stationed at the touchscreen off to the side continued her exploration and control of two of those monitors. The other people in the room avoided the chanter, who occupied the focal center of the installation. The temporary spatial anomaly altered the overall spectacle. The installation accommodated.

For those who entered into the environment, d'Agostino's ***DOUBLE YOU (and X,Y,Z)***, as well as his more recent installation **TransmissionS: In the WELL** provided a navigable platform for groups of individuals to negotiate an intellectually charged time and space. Surrounding the electronic monitors, the architectural configuration of the installation layout compounded the meaning woven into the array of images and surfaces. Sound helped lure the attention of the

casual spectator. The design of the physical exterior and electronic interior directed the experience and maximized the encounters individuals had not only with the screen but with each other.

At the center of such a provocative interactive environment, the visitor to ***DOUBLE YOU (and X,Y,Z)*** engages and celebrates the birth of the artist's first daughter in 1981, moving through her early childhood acquisition of language.* Alternately, the individual who comes upon **TransmissionS: In the WELL** encounters the darkside, the 1981 media spectacle of an Italian child's failed rescue from a well into which he had fallen. In **TransmissionS: In the WELL**, a towering cylinder capped with a ceiling projection of the lost boy houses a peephole on one side and a touchscreen on the other. Curiosity impels a closer examination of the electronic portals. At the same time, the scale of the ominous tower counters that attraction. Negotiating the effects of those respective forces, the viewer looks through the peephole, plays with the interactive screen. Each site opens up on a web of meaning woven across the inscribed events and their posthumous examination. Like any complex text, those intersections depend on the level of spectator engagement, processes of identification dependent on parenting experience, nationality, intellectual curiosity, to name a few.

In an installation, the artist imprints strong interactive forces by designing and constructing the highways along which the viewer-participants navigate their passage. Each pathway embodies its own conflicts, stories, and connections with historic and personal events. The latent connections remain active, as does the volcano, Mount Vesuvius. Ephemeral boundaries buffer the ideas and visions from the din of today's surrounding information and commodity based systems. Sustaining those boundaries, the recorded movements programmed into these installations imply a fixed,rational, and controlled illusion of randomness. In the end, each encounter transcends the captured experience.



* In ***DOUBLE YOU (and X,Y,Z)***, the stages of childhood development parallel the genesis of theoretical physics. The four-part structure of the work complements the four forces now believed to cause all interactions in theuniverse: light, gravity, strong and weak forces. The viewer-participant reconstructs the process of discovery, capturing the birth of a child (light/birth), her first linguistic steps (gravity/words), her coming into grammar (strong force/sentences), and learning to sing songs (weakforce/songs). The title ***DOUBLE YOU (and X,Y,Z)*** comes from a children's song that concludes with "now I know my ABC's next time won't you sing with me."

David Tafler *is Head of the Communication Department at Muhlenberg College in Allentown, Pennsylvania. He has written extensively on interactive media and new technologies.*

VR/RV: a Recreational Vehicle in Virtual Reality

On a drive in a recreational vehicle (RV) through a virtual reality (VR) theme park, VR/RV explores the displacement and disembodiment of a technologically determined culture which co-mingles video games and computerized war.

I refer to VR/RV as a form critical virtuality. The critique inherent in this work is that recent hybrids of VR and on-line networks are creating hyper-theaters of the absurd, high-tech forums that seem analogous to the function and practicality of the "self contained comforts" of an RV (a motor home or caravan).

" Your recreational vehicle has been designed and engineered to provide you with many self-contained comforts of home without having to be connected to outside sources...if operated within recommended procedures, [it] should provide you with many miles of virtually trouble free travel." - RV Owners Manual, Technical Publications 1985, Overland, KS.

In the case of VR/RV, there is a reversal of map and territory. The recreational vehicle drives through a computer generated landscape—a three dimensional map—onto which two dimensional video images are projected forming a new mediated territory. Floating within this computer simulated environment, these electronic video billboards are staging areas for inserting memories of utopian visions and dystopian nightmares (including the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and the computerized 'smart bombs' of the Persian Gulf War) that are a consequence of 20th Century technology.

—Peter d'Agostino

Whereas TRACES retreads analog history, VR/RV constitutes digital memory. VR/RV simulates a recreatio
explores the genesis of electronic technology. In its environment, the viewer-participant lies suspended, ho
ing of illusion by asking "how do you criticize VR in VR?" His work turns in on itself, questioning process

Each passing site helps form the connecting tissue, the temporal markers conflating space and time. On a
thematically woven together on the map. Hiroshima and the Persian Gulf War replace the mid west heartla
The tribal chants of North American indigenous people and the jazz strains of the African-American Philad
intentionally call attention to their own artifice.

When d'Agostino inhibits the seduction of the voyager, distance prevails. The cybervoyager does not becon
VR effects. While William Gibson in his cyberpunk novels charts the implicit terror of VR immersion, d'Ag
side of cyberspace. Fifty years of memories anchor the passage into any form of metaphysical future.

Such a protean apparatus that immerses the voyager in a topology of ideological constructions might never s
the prevalent system for venting frustrations and playing out obsessions. This sort of system, however, doe
can take charge and appropriate the virtual event. Otherwise, the electronic drug seduces the passive spec

In the end, the installation format enables the media (video) artist to break the constraints. Unfortunately,
The work constitutes the shell of the body, the artist's perspective, one experience among many but it has
artist acknowledges that other people did live the moments recorded as part of the text, some more directly
then their reaction will contribute to the evolution of the text.

—David Tafler

*More in the line of demystification than myth, Peter d'Agostino's VR/RV: a Recreational Vehicle as Virtual R
use of a head-mounted display to give the feeling of being entirely immersed in a realm of images.*

*These images change according to one's position in virtual space, revealing a world according to the name o
D'Agostino has brought VR down to earth by putting it into the preferred working class means of travel, the
sionally hear a snatch of song. Sometimes we also hear ambient sounds from the "external" virtual world,
revealing a symbolic landscape that corresponds to the four parts of d'Agostino's virtual world: Philadelphi*

*Here is a symbolic map that underlines the arbitrary nature of direction in virtual reality itself. The directio
tory. The landscape of each direction is composed of crude graphics, as befitting their symbolic status, wh
From towers looming in two of the four corners of the world, one can see a panorama laid out something l
on the other hand, is composed of buildings that are transparent symbols or wire-Frames under construct
D'Agostino has constructed a virtual space that is a reminder of the weight of history that wishful thinking*

—Margaret Morse

ional vehicle (RV) travelling through a virtual environment of "utopian hopes and dystopian fears." VR/RV hovering between reception and illusion. In the midst of that immersion, d'Agostino interrogates the mean-ss as well as content.

a cybernetic adventure, the voyager travels down a two lane highway of historic memories tied to the sites rtland of the United States with the bombed out overseas test sites of American techno-military expeditions. adelphia experience stretch the spirit and bracket the soul. Meanwhile, the Rocky papier-maché Mountains

ome Peter Pan, "I'm flying." A critical border splits the voyager enabling his or her intellect to examine the Agostino establishes the links between the cybernetic horrors that exist on the inside and those that lie out-

r supplant the video game. Alas, a value system predicated on achieving highest scores will probably remain loes have the capacity to compile insights. When recollection becomes a reworkable memory, the voyager pectator en route to fabricating his or her history and memory.

ly, the most advanced systems preclude their own distribution. D'Agostino's installations occupy that edge. as the capacity to trigger many others. When d'Agostino writes "I wasn't there; This isn't about that," the ctly than others. "If somebody wants to break through the screen and tell you what the reality was about..."

Reality is an interactive virtual environment that is presented here as video documentation. VR requires the

of the medium, vies with reality itself. The typical means of locomotion in virtual reality is the "fly through."
the RV. The world is seen past the dashboard and through the windshield of a van, "within" which we occa-
ld, from bells and honks to a siren. Most often, however, the sound resembles the scanning of a radio dial,
phia or East, the Rockies or West, Kuwait or Middle East and Hiroshima or Far East.

tions are, of course, cultural, rather than true orientations, that betray a perspective shaped by Western his-
while billboards in the landscape and the monitor on the dashboard reveal scenes of photographic realism.
g like the lands of Oz. One of the lands is a devastated Hiroshima, another the oil fields of Kuwait. The city,
ction. Meanwhile, the chanting of native peoples filters out of the "natural world" of the Rockies beyond.
ng about the virtual world would like to leave behind.

THE @VESU.VIUS INSTALLATION
is composed of images of Mount Vesuvius and its environs near Naples, Italy,
juxtaposed with scenes of daily life where I grew up in The Bronx.
As an Italian American born of Neapolitan parents,
I begin with Vesuvius as my point of departure for traveling
back and forth through time to physical and virtual places.

The installation includes a website that serves as a critical forum for exploring
many of the paradoxes of ***natural***, ***cultural*** and ***virtual*** identities.
Issues of identity are drawn from the natural surroundings, cultural histories,
personal memories, and on-line communities. Beyond nature, history, and ethnicity,
@VESU.VIUS also explores metaphors of identity from **melting pot** and **tossed salad**
to the use of **avatars** in cyberspace. The relational concepts that I have created
intermingle some of my own recollections and projections
with other sources. Some of these links follow.

Natural:

@Vesu.Vius represents natural forces and the life cycles of birth, destruction and renewal. When Charles Dickens visited Vesuvius in 1845, he wrote about *"the strange and melancholy sensation of seeing the Destroyed and the Destroyer making this quiet picture in the sun."* More recently, in *The Volcano Lover*, Susan Sontag describes the mountain as, *"[T]he mouth of a volcano. Yes, mouth and lava tongue. A body, a monstrous living body, both male and female. It emits, ejects. It is also an interior, an abyss."* However, the iconic image of the volcano is based on the first hand account of Pliny, the Younger, who recorded his direct observations of Vesuvius erupting in 79 AD. The website includes links to these documents as well as to live cameras that monitor the volcanoes near Vesuvius bringing these images of natural splendor and their implied catastrophic threat to the region into the present.

Cultural:

Mount Vesuvius is a significant historical symbol, particularly for those who were born in this region referred to as Mezzogiorno or "the land that time forgot." Those who live in the shadow of Vesuvius were colonized by a long succession of invaders and are *"ever aware that they might at any moment be flung into obscurity by a calamitous convolution."* —*Unto the Sons*, Gay Talese.

@Vesu.Vius brings the past into a living relationship with the present by linking historical and contemporary sources. The website provides links to Neapolitan intellectual history focusing on the writings of Giordano Bruno (1548-1600), Giambattista Vico (1666-1744), and Benedetto Croce (1866-1952). These philosophers have provided a rich exploration of issues ranging from: nature and culture, the dichotomy of the mind and the body as well as the dialectics of high art and popular art.

Commentaries by the inhabitants of the region and of émigrés and their descendants who came to America are also included.

On-going dialogues called *Two Volcanoes* connects the @Vesu.Vius and @Etna websites, documenting a long term friendship while acknowledging a time when Naples and Sicily formed the Kingdom of Two Sicilies.

Virtual:

As we approach the twenty-first century, technological changes threaten to accelerate the eradication of cultural difference. In *The Virtual Community: homesteading on the virtual frontier*, Howard Rheingold writes that *"the social networks in diverse societies such as the U.S. and other parts of the world lack the shared ethnic and historical context that strongly guides people's social communication."* Although the Internet has enormous potential for facilitating a sense of community, this online virtuality also breeds isolation and alienation.

The philospher, Vico, who is primarily known for his concept of a cyclical history, was also concerned that the mind was becoming less grounded in the body and that people were less capable of and defining themselves in humanistic terms. With these concerns, @Vesu.Vius moves beyond chauvinistic notions of ethnocentrism, towards a "creative ethnicity," with the realization that *"Ethnicity is made of a community that is cultural and psychological, not necessarily geographic."* —*Blood of My Blood*, Richard Gambino.

"When you come to a fork in the road take it." —Y. Berra

Italian

"On the 24th of August, about one in the afternoon… A cloud shot up to a great height…it appeared sometimes bright and sometimes dark and spotted, according as it was either more or less impregnated with earth and cinders."—Pliny the Younger

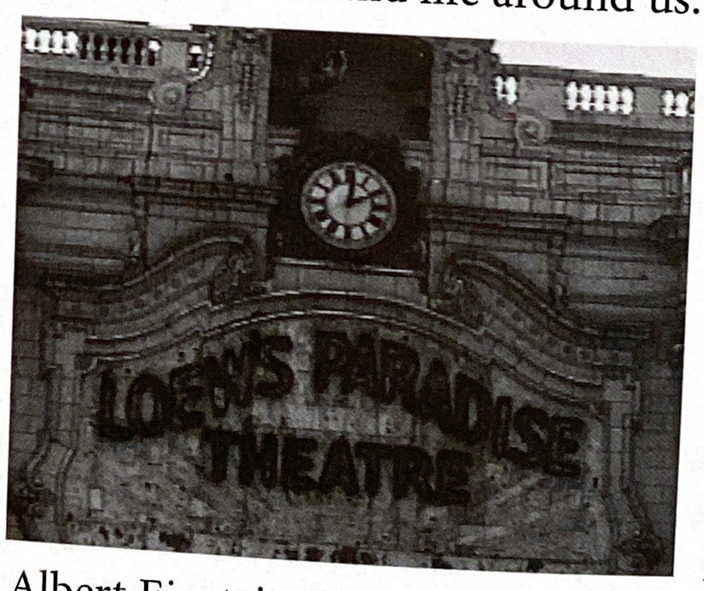
79 Vesuvio erupts—approx. 2,000 die.
386 S. Agostino's religious conversion in Milan.
1307–1321 Dante Alighieri's *La Divina Commedia.*
1451 Cristoforo Colombo born.
1503–05 da Vinci paints *Mona Lisa.*
1507 Amerigo Vespucci's *Mundus Novas.*
1600 Giordano Bruno burned at the stake.
1725 Vico's *Scienza Nuova.*

1776 Fillipo Mazzei's *"All men must be equal to each in law,"* translated by Thomas Jefferson.
1861 Garibaldi credited with the Unification of Italy.
1892 Mother Cabrini opens her hospital in New York.
1900 & 1901 My parents born in Cervinara.
1927 Sacco & Vanzetti executed.
1945 Death of Mussolini.
1945 *Open City,* Rossellini's neo-realist film.
1992 Publication of *La Storia: Five Centuries of the Italian American Experience,* by Mangione & Morreale.
1995 *"I am not Italian, I am Neapolitan,"* Sophia Loren.

American

"He speaks in your voice, American…"

The language that Don DeLillo refers to in his novel *Underworld* is a mix of slangs—from baseball to advertising slogans— with a special brand of Italian American from The Bronx. He describes places familiar to me such as: Arthur Avenue and "the lots," —the preferred hang out of our youth. In these lots we made huts, and discovered all that was important about ourselves and life around us. As new houses were built and the lots disappeared, we moved to "the mountains." Then these larger spaces were claimed for other uses. Our mountains on Morris Park became the Albert Einstein College of Medicine. After that we moved to new hang outs, to White Castle and to the Loew's Paradise.



The times changed as we rode the subways to Manhattan and back, "from Battery to Holy Bronx." Mickey Mantle replaced Joe DiMaggio; Rocky Marciano retired undefeated, but Muhammad Ali became The Greatest; and, in quick succession our music shifted from Frank Sinatra to Buddy Holly, Thelonious Monk and Bob Dylan.

@Vesu.Vius

Anthony, My intentions for the @Vesu.Vius project have taken a sharper focus. Last year, I videotaped my walk to the top of Vesuvius, down to the pits and valleys of Pompeii, and retraced my steps, through the streets of Napoli to the L'Accademia di Belli Arti, where I studied over 30 years ago.

I came to discover the part of my identity that originated in the nearby town of Cervinara where my family's Bronx-Napolitano dialect had its roots. I saw the place where my mother and father were born, and their mothers and fathers before them. I was 20 years old then, and had moved from my birthplace in East Harlem to The Bronx, moved again and again through Italian American neighborhoods to be closer to the *paisans* and *comaras* from Cervinara who were getting ahead. In catching up, we were becoming more Americanized, yet were, at the same time, trying to maintain our values as a close-knit family.

Ironically, it was my visit to Italy in 1965, where I sought to become more Italian, that pushed me over the edge in the opposite direction. It was there, that in many ways, I became more American. In spite of several months of speaking, grooming and dressing like my friends, my fantasy of being truly Neapolitan, proved to be a mere illusion that was shattered unexpectedly.

One day, as I was about to cross a street in Napoli, a blind man standing on the corner put out his arm, indicating that he wanted to be accompanied across the street. Without saying a word, we locked arms and halfway across he asked, "Se Americano"? "Si," I responded knowing that my accent would betray me if I claimed otherwise. "Buon Giorno," we repeated as we parted ways.

Later that week I learned how the blind man knew that I wasn't Italian. "That cologne you wear," my cousin Menita said, "is only used by the Americans, mostly tourists and those who are at the military base here." That was only one of my identity crises that year. — *pda*

Excerpt from: *Two Volcanoes* by d'Agostino and Fragola.

@ Etna

Peter, This seems to be the point of departure for our dialogue. I had the same quest, with similar results, except that I never reconciled myself to the split between my Italian heritage and American identity. Whereas your work seems to me, heretofore, distinct from any attempt to reconcile your cultural identity with your discovery, my work, in contrast, has focused on that dichotomy.

In the summer after my sophomore year at Columbia, I traveled from Northern Italy to Calabria and Sicily. In Italy I realized that I, too, was not Italian, but neither did I feel totally integrated with American culture. My reception in Calabria was not open, effusive, and accepting, as I had envisioned and as yours had been. In Sicily, though, I discovered the connection to my past, to the lives of my grandparents and "antenati" that I had seeking since childhood.

Moreover, I experienced a deep connection to the island that appeased an inchoate longing that had been instilled in me since childhood as I listened to my grandmother's tales of the island, the volcanic eruptions and flowing tongue of molten lava that would have destroyed her village had it not been for the intercession of her beloved St. Egidio. As a child I had envisioned and felt an affinity with Etna, that the people call La Montagna, but I was not prepared for its grandeur that I found oddly soothing and threatening. The mountain, sometimes peaceful with a languid plume of smoke, others times showering the night sky with sparks, loomed majestic and enchanting. Ten years ago I returned to Sicily and watched the sun rise on Mt. Etna and I experienced a sense of oneness with creation and the vastness of the universe that was comforting rather than frightening.

My journey was one of exploration and self-renewal. Within view of its smoky crater I felt a sensation akin to rapture. By investigating the essential mythic nature of the volcano, I delved deeper into myself. For years I felt apart from mainstream America and separated from others who understood this need for connection. By entering into this dialogue, developing this website, and becoming cognizant of the potential for communication via the web and e-mail I have emerged with a renewed sense of identity and clarity of purpose in my work. —*afragola*

Anthony Fragola is a professor of Broadcasting and Cinema at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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 two decades. D'Agostino's work has been exhibited internationally in the form of installations, performances, telecommunications events and broadcast productions. He is professor of Film and Media Arts, Temple University, Philadelphia.

Education

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

Awards and Honors

1997 Bellagio Center, Lake Como, Italy
Rockefeller Foundation, Artist-in-Residence
American Academy in Rome, Visiting Artist (also 1986)
1996-97 Fulbright Fellow (Brazil)
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 (also 1985)
1989 National Endowment for the Arts, Fellowship (also 1974, 1977, 1979)
1983–85 Center for Advanced Visual Studies, MIT, Fellow
1981 Television Laboratory, WNET, New York, Artist-in-Residence

Individual Exhibitions (Selected)

1997 Cultural Space, Brasilia, Brazil
1995 University Art Museum, Berkeley,
Weatherspoon Art Gallery, UNC, Greensboro,
Rosenberg Gallery, Goucher College
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
1982 The Kitchen Center, 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
1975 80 Langton Street, San Francisco
1973 Quay Gallery, San Francisco

Group Exhibitions (Selected)

1998 "Images for the Millennium,"Long Island Center for Photography, New York
1997 "New Video," School of Visual Arts, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.
1995 "InfoArt," Kwangju Biennale, Korea.
"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 Biennal
"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

Collections (Selected)

Museum of Modern Art, 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

Selected interactive projects:

STRING CYCLES, (1989-) CD-ROM & DVD in-progress.

1995 "InfoArt," Kwangju Biennale, Korea
Excerpt on *InfoART- The Digital Frontier: From Video to Virtual Reality,* CD-ROM, Rutt Interactive, NY, 1997

DOUBLE YOU (and X,Y,Z.), (1981-87) Videodisc

1987 Philadelphia Museum of Art

1986 American Academy in Rome, Italy
Los Angles Contemporary Exhibitions
Houston Center for Photography

LA-BOSTON, Picturephone Event

1981 UCLA and Center for Advanced Visual Studies, MIT, Cambridge (with Antonio Muntadas)

ALPHA SLO-SCAN

1978 Wright State University, Dayton, Vancouver Art Gallery and San Francisco Art Institute

Selected Bibliography:

Atkins, R. "The Art World & I Go On Line" *Art in America*, Dec., New York: 1995

____ *ArtSpeak: A Guide to Contemporary Ideas*, New York: 1991

Bellour, R. and A-M Duguet. (eds). Video, *Communications*, No. 48, France: 1988

Boyle, D. *Video Classics: A Guide to Video Art and Documentary Tapes*. Phoenix: 1986

d'Agostino, P. *Alpha, Trans, Chung: Semiotics, Film, and Interpretation*. San Francisco: 1978

____ *TeleGuide: Proposal for QUBE*. San Francisco: 1980

____ and Tafler, D. (eds). *Transmission: toward a post-television culture*. Los Angeles: 1995

Hall, D. & S. Fifer, (eds). *Illuminating Video*, New York: 1991

Drohojowska, H. "Don't Touch...Now Don't," *LAICA Journal*. Sept/Oct, Los Angeles: 1979.

Foley, S. *Space/Time/Sound-1970s: A Decade in the Bay Area*. San Francisco: 1981

Marincola, P. "DOUBLE YOU," Review, *Artforum*, Nov., New York: 1987

Morse, M. "Tender Technology: From the Next Generation of Electronic Art," *Art as Signal: Inside the Loop*, Krannert Art Museum, catalog, Champaign: 1995*

____ "Staging Scenes of Loss" *Video Networks*, Oct/Nov, BAVC, San Francisco: 1990**

Podesta, P. *Resolutions: A Critique of Video Art*. Los Angeles: 1985

Stiles, K. and P. Selz. *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art*, Berkeley: 1996

Tafler, D. "Der Blick und der Sprung"/"The Look and the Leap." *Kunstforum*, Sept/Oct, Germany: 1989

____ "Beyond Narrative: Notes toward a theory of interactive cinema" *Millennium Film Journal*, Nos. 20/21, New York: 1988

Zippay, L. *International Video*, New York: 1991

*see excerpt pp. 16–17 / **see excerpt pp. 24–25

peter d'Agostino: interactivity & intervention, 1978–1999

Installations in the Exhibition with Acknowlegments

Video/sound/editing: Peter d'Agostino

@Vesu.Vius (1996-99)

www.temple.edu/newtechlab/Vesu.Vius

Thanks to: Steven Estrella, music; Anna Minkkinen, Steven Campbell, Pasquale Pesce, Bellagio Center, Italy.

1999 Lehman College Art Gallery (premiere)

VR/RV: a Recreational Vehicle in Virtual Reality, (1993-94)

Thanks to: Banff Centre for the Arts, visual and media arts.

1995 Krannert Art Gallery, University of Illinois, Champaign

1994 Banff Centre for the Arts

TRACES (1991-95)

www.temple.edu/newtechlab/TRACES

Thanks to: Taka Iimura, Masatomo Toyohara.

1995 Pacific Film Archive, University Art Museum, Berkeley

Weatherspoon Art Gallery, University of North Carolina, Greensboro, Goucher College

TransmissionS (1985-90)

Thanks to: Jon Gibson, music; Ken Shannon, Steven Estrella and Tim McDonald, computer programming. With Adriano Apra, Beatrice Wood, and John Gutmann.

1990 "In the WELL," Philadelphia Museum of Art

"On the LINES," Rjksmuseum Twenthe, Enschede, and V2 , Den Bosch, Holland

1991 European Media Art Festival, Osnabruck, Germany

Long Beach Museum of Art

Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia

Proposal for QUBE (1978)

Thanks to: Kathy Rae Huffman, Lew Thomas, Judd Yalkut.

1978 Sullivant Gallery, Ohio State University, Columbus

1979 Long Beach Museum of Art, California

1983 "17th Bienal de Sao Paulo," Brazil

The artist dedicates the exhibition to his brother, Jon.
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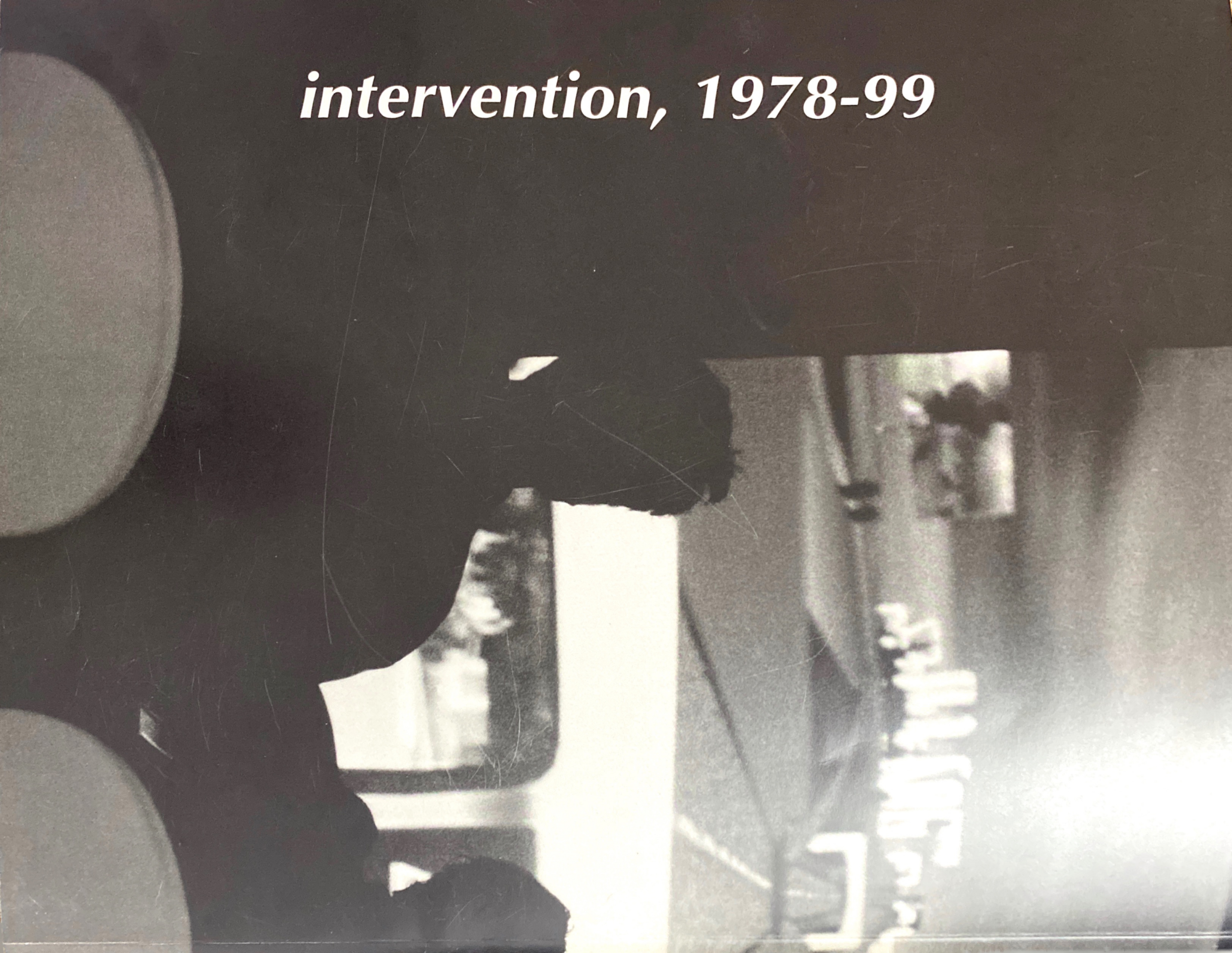
intervention, 1978-99