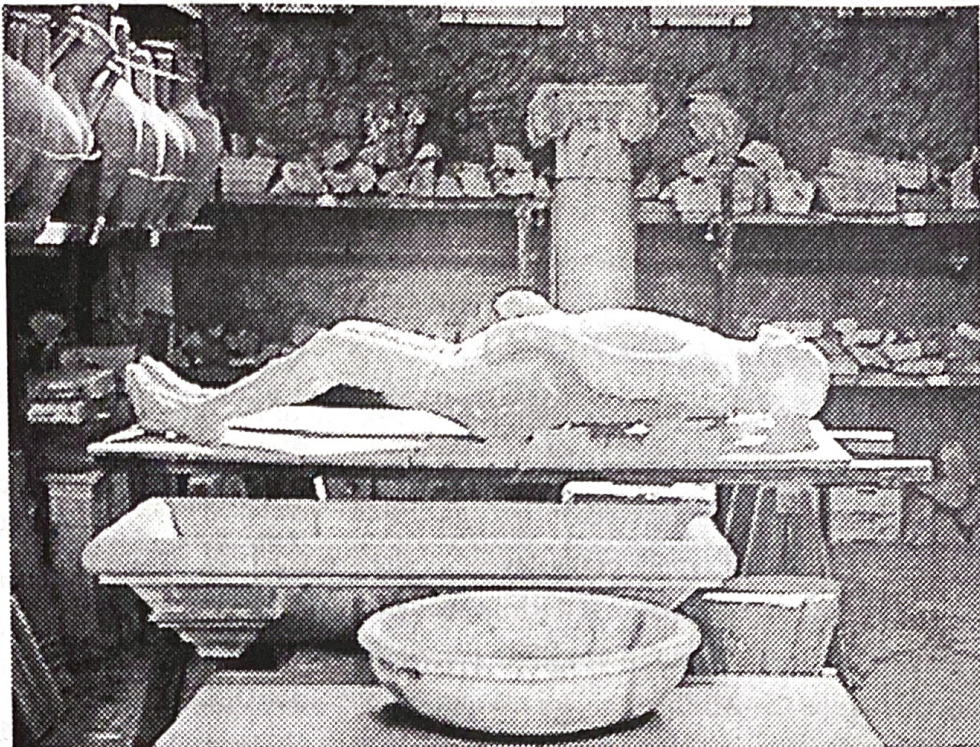


## *Interactivity and Intervention: Peter d'Agostino's Art of Ideas*

Robert Atkins, Guest Curator



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.Virus, 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' 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”<sup>2</sup> 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.”<sup>3</sup> 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.Virus. 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

**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.<sup>6</sup> 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."<sup>7</sup> 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*<sup>8</sup> 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."<sup>9</sup> 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."<sup>10</sup>

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 tape—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 peep-hole 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 peep-holes—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 creat-



ed 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:<sup>11</sup> 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 super-highway. You name it—we can do it."<sup>12</sup> 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-à-vis the bombs that were dropped on Japan and even the magazine's name. (Although seen only on the web in the Lehman installation, d'Agostino has also used details from the *LIFE* magazine cover-image as large-scale, photographic prints mounted on the walls of previous exhibition venues.)

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 oil-fields 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."<sup>13</sup>



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."<sup>14</sup> 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'."<sup>15</sup> 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 ([www.temple.edu/newtechlab/Vesu.Vius](http://www.temple.edu/newtechlab/Vesu.Vius)) 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."<sup>16</sup>

On 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 we must simultaneously accommodate the past and acknowledge a complex present. D'Agostino suggests that reconciliation is a vital, creative act.

#### 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.