

Rod Dickinson
Closed Circuit
(Who, What, Where, When, Why and How #2)
in collaboration with Steve Rushton



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Who, What, Where, When, Why and How
Live Performance
SMART Project Space, Amsterdam, 11 July 2009
Photo: Nicki Musgrave

Closed Circuit (Who, What, Where, When, Why and How #2) is a new performative work by Rod Dickinson. It interrogates the historical form of the presidential speech and government press briefing. Set in a meticulously constructed press conference environment, two actors deliver a simulated press briefing.

The script of *Closed Circuit (Who, What, Where, When, Why and How #2)* was written in collaboration with writer Steve Rushton, and is composed solely of fragments of press statements and speeches delivered since the Cold War. The script focuses on the way in which similar declarations have been used by



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numerous governments – across continents and spanning the ideological divide – to declare and maintain states of crisis and justify acts of violence.

The press briefing is inexorably linked to the feedback circuitry of television. Just as the crisis

is always in the present, the liveness of television calls the present forward. The press statement thus works as a feedback mechanism, which is carefully constructed for the template of television that disseminates it, and which in turn shapes political and social reality.



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The fragments are woven together irrespective of context and date – in fact the only change that Dickinson and Rushton have made to the original material is to remove any specific mention of people, places and dates. Consequently, the who, what, where, when, why and how are removed from the spoken

text. However, their provenance is revealed via synced autocue text scrolling up large screens positioned on both sides of the audience. The visual and theatrical syntax of the political briefing alongside the repetition of rhetoric reproduces the logic that governs public life and media in general.

They Came to See Who Came
Steve Rushton

You know the script: A politician and a military spokesperson mount the stage; each takes their place behind a podium. They face the ladies and gentlemen of the press and a bank of TV cameras. A line of flags provides an appropriate backdrop as the politician begins to speak. The politician reminds us of the necessity of the action they have taken. The politician reminds us that we did not want war, in fact we did everything in our power to prevent conflict, but if an aggressor wilfully turns aside all overtures for a peaceful resolution, and if the aggressor continues to threaten the fundamental values of our society, then there is no choice. The military spokesperson now points to a screen that demonstrates the efficiency of the weaponry our forces have employed against the aggressor. It also displays evidence of the military capacity of the aggressor. It seems that if they were afforded the opportunity they could inflict terrible harm on our forces, and to the way of life many have died to preserve.

But the press briefing is more than just a script; you also need the stage, the podium, the uniforms, the flags, the press and the cameras if you really want to master reality. By 'mastering reality' I mean that there are certain media events that simply through their performance can have an effect in the world. Maybe you remember back in 2003, when a military man mounted the stage and provided evidence of Weapon's of Mass Destruction. What surprised many about the outcome of this performance was the comparative ease with which it was

exercised, and how a war could be prosecuted despite any real 'evidence' being produced that could suggest that such weapons did exist. It was as if the whole machinery of the press briefing was a feedback loop, which justified military action but also legitimised the press briefing itself. For those of us raised with the notion that the press and TV news exist to somehow 'get to the bottom' of things, and that the news media are a forum in which things can be proven or disproved, the ease with which transparent nonsense became a matter of fact that could justify fatal action came as a shock.

Whatever this thing we call 'the news media' is, it is not in its nature to simply test matters of fact. The WMD incident demonstrated that the apparatus of the media actually has the ability to **produce facts**. The press briefing demonstrates two fundamental things about the structure of contemporary media: 1) It is a feedback loop that gives legitimacy and a narrative to those who produce it, 2) The incantation that 'produced' WMD reminds us of the most valuable lesson the French philosopher Michel Foucault taught us – **discourse produces its object**.

I'd like to travel back to the beginning of the video revolution and reflect on two media events produced by the collaborative art and design group Ant Farm in 1975, Media Burn – in which a customised Cadillac was driven through a pyramid of blazing television sets – and *The Eternal Frame* (with T.R. Uthco) – a re-enactment of the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

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www.aksioma.org/closed_circuit

Stara Elektrarna (The Old Power Station), Ljubljana, Slovenia
September 28, 2010 at 8 PM

As part of the festival Mladi Levi organized by Bunker

Executive producer: Marcela Okretič
Coordinator: Janez Janša
Public Relations: Mojca Zupanič



AKSIOMA

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than anyone else that the media event isn't something you simply consume. Describing the unfolding hallucination of the factory, Warhol said, "They came to see who came".⁵ The people who come to see the party become the party, figure and ground become a single flowing image. In the same way the figure and ground of the press shift backwards and forwards, from the press as they arrive to report the event to the press as their bodies provide the props for the event.

A version of this text was first published as part of a series on how media master reality in *The First/Last Newspaper*, edited by Dexter Sinister (November 2009).

Notes

1. Don DeLillo, *Underworld*. New York: Scribner (1997), p. 488.
2. Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz, *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History*. Harvard University Press (1994), p. 150.
3. Chip Lord quoted in Constance M. Lewallen and Steve Seid, *Ant Farm 1968-1978*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press (2004), p. 73.
4. Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-events in America*, originally published in 1962.
5. Andy Warhol quoted in David Joselit, *Feedback: Television Against Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press (2007), p. 120.

Ant Farm's Chip Lord, speaking on the subject of *Media Burn* in 2002, cited Michael Shambert's seminal book *Guerrilla Television* (1971), which was an inspiration to various initiatives that combined the collectivist ideals of the 1960s with the potentially democratising (new) technologies of video, closed-circuit TV and cable of the 1970s: "[Using TV to destroy TV] was consistent with the *Guerrilla Television* position, to destroy the monopoly of centralized television. There was a lot of rhetoric about how cable TV was going to democratize production."³

Ant Farm's media critique can be understood as a critical response to the promise of video, and perhaps more than any other artists they articulated its contradictions. In one respect, once released from the monopoly of the networks and accessed by ordinary citizens the Portapak video recorder and the video tape promised to be personally empowering and social: make your own social and technological networks, make and distribute your own programs, construct your own social software, democratise artistic practice. But the values of self-empowerment could easily be accommodated within a media feedback system in which our performance becomes not only a commodity that we sell to ourselves but also a means by which the media could narrativise and legitimise itself.

As long ago as 1962, Daniel Boorstin coined the term 'pseudo-event' to describe events designed solely to be reported: presidential debates, press conferences (and media burns).⁴ But perhaps Andy Warhol understood better

"Who can deny that we are a nation addicted to television and the constant flow of media, and not a few of us are frustrated by this addiction. Now I ask you, my fellow Americans, haven't you ever wanted to put your foot through your television screen?"

The artist-president is the rhetorical shell of politics itself, his speech collapses past, future and present as the ghost of politics' past reports on the significance of what is about to happen.

"Today, there stand before us two media



Ant Farm, *Media Burn*, 1975

matadors, brave young men from Ant Farm who are about to go forth into the unknown, and let me say this, these artists are pioneers, as surly as Louis and Clark when they explored uncharted territory, they are pioneers as surly as Armstrong and Aldrin when they set foot on the moon..."

era in which the vision of a murdered president was finally realised. It joins a string of images that are pre-scripted, including the 22 seconds of the Zapruder footage and the televised funeral of Kennedy, which folds back into itself to make a narrative of reality.

The media event *Media Burn* was performed on July 4, 1975, a few months prior to *The Eternal Frame*. A modified 1959 Cadillac El Dorado Biarritz (The Phantom Dream Car), piloted by two drivers guided only by a video monitor, was driven through a pyramid of blazing television



Ant Farm with T.R. Uthco, *The Eternal Frame*, 1975

sets. As in *The Eternal Frame*, *Media Burn* featured the artist-president, John F. Kennedy, played by Ant Farm member Doug Hall. He gives a content-less speech that sets the stage for the main event. Indeed, the speech highlights the degree to which a media event needs to be ritualised. The speech is one of the support structures that need to be put into place in order to constitute a 'real' pseudo-event. The president speaks:

events (the rise of the Solidarity movement and the eventual collapse of the Polish government).² The event was a ceremony, but a ceremony of a particular sort. Like the incantation of *Weapons of Mass Destruction*, through its performance it established the meaning of the event and institutionalised it in collective memory. It is at that moment of shamanistic feedback, when a new definition of what is possible is established, *that* the next step is urged forward. The media event can be seen as a form of consecration because it gathers into itself a series of values that feed back to form a narrative of a state of



Ant Farm with T.R. Uthco, *The Eternal Frame*, 1975

affairs that requires action. The ceremony of the countdown (which is itself a media invention, introduced in Fritz Lang's *Frau im Mond* in 1929) begins the narrative that ends with the moon landing. This event – staged for television from countdown to touchdown – inscribes a series of values through its performance. It speaks of an era of positivist triumph, when American know-how knew how, and it represented the end of an

year that Zapruder's footage became 'publicly available'. Ant Farm's copy of the film came from conspiracy theory sources and was originally bootlegged out of the *Life Magazine* lab. Ant Farm originally wanted to film early in the morning, to avoid the crowds, but it became evident to them that the light was not the same as the light on the Zapruder footage and they needed it to be as close to the 'real thing' as possible. Via the Warren Commission the Zapruder footage was already caught in a media feedback loop, forming a catalyst that generated the noise of speculation, folding back to create a conspiracy panic. Because it was not visible as a moving image for eleven years after the event, the footage had become the absent centre of the Kennedy assassination – 22 seconds of action stretching into eternity. The re-enactment served as a response to the belief that the Zapruder footage could somehow *reveal* something that had been hidden and repressed. But maybe the footage is replayed and re-enacted so often precisely because it *fails to represent*. A failure of representation is, in psychoanalytical terms, the central characteristic of trauma, but the re-enactment also fails to speak of something at the centre of the technology of non-scripted film – its promise to display evidence, its promise to *carry the burden of proof*.

Four years after Ant Farm's historic media interventions, Pope John Paul II staged his own media event when he visited Poland. The visit has been described by writers Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz as a *shamanised media event*, which through its staging actually steered a course of

Ant Farm's re-enactment of the Kennedy assassination, *The Eternal Frame*, was made the

sixties, with a distinctly trippy edge. The footage started rolling in one room but not the others and it was filled with slurs and jostles, it was totally jostled footage, a home movie shot with a Super 8, and the limousine came down the street, muddied by sun glint, and the head dipped out of the frame and reappeared and then the force of the shot that killed him, unexpectedly the head shot, and people in the room went ooh, and then the next ooh, and five seconds later the room at the back went ooh, the same release of breath every time, like blurts of disbelief."¹

In this scene, DeLillo combines multiple screens with the delay techniques of Dan Graham's video pieces from around that time (techniques also used by Frank Gillette & Ira Schneider in their highly influential *Wipe Cycle* from 1969). It merges the use of video as *radical software* – [where] elements can be patched and re-configured in ways that were not possible with film – together with an understanding that television has been around long enough to be regarded as *junk*. All this is blended with the shock tactics of art-media groups from the early 70s such as Ant Farm, Radical Software, TVTV (Top Value Television).

If the 8mm footage was created in the age of the news reel, it is mediated in the age of video, which operates under the economy of the feedback loop – to be re-recorded on to tape and repeated over and over again, to be set in the eternal frame, to cycle within the eternal return of 'rolling news'.

Ant Farm's re-enactment of the Kennedy assassination, *The Eternal Frame*, was made the

The twenty-two seconds of home-movie footage of the Kennedy assassination, taken in Dallas in 1963 by bystander Abraham Zapruder, were sold to *Life Magazine* on the night of the shooting for \$150,000. *Life* published stills from the film shortly afterwards. Later, the Zapruder family would be paid 10 million dollars by the US government for rights to the film. The Warren Commission used the film as the basis for a series of reconstructions that served as part of their investigation into the assassination, and reproduced stills in their report of September 1964. The film itself was not broadcast until 1975. It is hard to credit that well into the 1970s the public did not view a moving image that, perhaps more than any other, came to define the turbulence of the 1960s.

Don DeLillo's 1997 novel *Underground* captures the sense of this moment in a fictional account of one of the film's first public, or semi-public, viewings in the summer of 1974. The scene takes place in an apartment with television sets in every room. In each room a video of the same piece of footage plays, with a slight delay. DeLillo writes:

"The event was rare and strange. It was the screening of a bootleg copy of an eight-millimetre home movie that ran for twenty seconds. A little over twenty seconds probably. The footage was known as the Zapruder film and almost no one outside the government had seen it. Of course the event had a cachet, an edge of special intensity. But if those in attendance felt they were lucky to be here, they also knew a kind of floating fear, mercury reading out of the