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<td>Source</td>
<td><em>Afterimage / Visual Studies Workshop</em></td>
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<td>Type</td>
<td>interview</td>
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<td>Language</td>
<td>English</td>
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CULTURAL ICONS AND TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE

MARITA STURKEN

Over the past 20 years, video artist Chip Lord moved from a radical position as a member of an innovative collective to the relative stability of an academic professor. It would be tempting to call his career a model of the entrenchment of the video movement within the institutional world, but to do so would be to fall into that trap of history-making—the reduction of individual lives to formulas of specific paths. His work is one of the many instances that show how changing and critiquing aspects of popular culture. In choosing to interview Lord, I was interested in precisely this question of how artists such as Art Farm are historicizing.

Chip Lord was born in 1944 and graduated with a degree in architecture from Tulane University in 1968. That same year, he co-founded Art Farm with Doug Michels as an art and architecture group. Shortly thereafter, Curtis Schreier and Hudson Marquez joined the group. Because most of Art Farm's members had backgrounds in architecture, their approach to media was significantly different from the other video collectives of the late 1960s and early 1970s: it was decided that they would produce works that combined performance, media, sculpture, and architectural and graphic design. Couched somatic and theoretical discussions of the video's aesthetic and technological possibilities within a larger context of the social, and personal, and longest on a billboard on Sunset Strip to advertise an article of electronic jewelry, the "Weke." Lord created a scene in which two characters drive down Sunset Blvd, distributing the billboard in a deliberately stilted acting style to distance the impetus to your work. What's the status of the cultural icon? What does it say about American society and self-images? What does the automobile really represent?

Chip Lord: If you're using it as a material of art making, it comes with a lot of baggage. In Cadillac Ranch, the cars themselves have many properties as sculpture, if you can divorce yourself from their cultural context and simply look at them. They are amazing objects from a period that was a pinnacle for automobile manufacturing, when the balance between function and styling really swung toward styling. In the 1950s, rationally went out the window and the stylists had all the power in Detroit. Kids could identify every make and model and gracefully anticipated the new car introductions in the fall. Dream cars were truly futuristic; taillights kept growing bigger, and by 1957 they had three-lens paint jobs, push-button transmissions, bullet bumpers, "autronic" eyes and just amazing forms and shapes in steel and chrome.

With Cadillac Ranch we buried ten Cadillacs in a row alongside Interstate 40 (the old Route 66) just west of Amarillo, TX. Each car represented a model change in the production still from The Amano Mawa Tapes (1980) by Chip Lord, Doug Hall, and Jody Procter. Left to right: Bill Teltzron, Doug Hall, Jody Procter, and Chip Lord.

Marita Sturken: You have characterized your work as cultural introspection and a dialogue with icons of contemporary life. I would rephrase that to say icons of U.S. culture. I'm curious about how that started, and how you see that as evolution of the tallfins. This was clearly a sculptural act, but with a minimal amount of formal manipulation. Because the sculptural properties came with the cars—they were shaped by stylists in the 1950s and they were historically interesting.

MS: But it had a personal impetus as well. In other words, you were a car freak, right? So there was a very conscious decision at one point to have something that was part of the way that you personally deal with U.S. culture, and to step back and examine it?

CL: It was an ongoing dialogue within this collaborative structure, Art Farm. A car obsession was something we had in common, and we knew the automobile was a potent symbol, at the heart of what America is. There was also an interest in doing hybrid, interdisciplinary work, which I think in part came out of that collaborative process. For example, Media Burn integrated performance, sculpture, video, film, and graphic design. The audience got an invitation to a performance art event, but it was designed as spectacle and modeled after events like the Fourth of July with the politician's speech, the reporters and news-teams, and so on. It had a logo and we designed the surgeon programs and press passes as well as the event itself. We worked on Media Illum for a year; it just grew from the idea of creating an image of a car crashing through a wall of TV sets.

MS: It was also a deconstruction of the media spectacle itself. Your use of the car as a cultural icon has evolved and changed. In Media Burn Art Farm positioned the automobile as this fantastic symbol—the car of the future, the "phantom dream car," with lots of gadgets and electronic devices. It's like a spaceship in which we, the audience, are
objects with fantasy and dreams and Easy Living also invites that kind of participation. The intention was to leave it open ended, open to interpretation. Auto Life is the flip side of those dreams. It's deconstructing the news and emphasizing the cynicism that's a subset in network news, the kind of "view from above" atitude. It commingles the glamour of cars with the drudgery of the everyday—so you see traffic shots from helicopters, traffic shots in Bend, and images of the world petroleum economy. All the footage is recorded from television news. It's like a fictional "Class War." It's the dark side of Auto Americas, you might say.

Auto Life and Easy Living are, themselves, obsessive activities. Auto Life was an obsessive collecting, categorizing, and recontextualizing—TS Eliot put it, "the labor of sitting, combining, constructing, expurgating, correcting, testing; this fruitful task is as much critical as creative."

Easy Living was a collaboration in which Mickey McGeeen and I shared an obsession for these artifacts of play and for technical excellence toward achieving realism in a medium that couldn't possibly ever be real. We used cinematic devices to reinforce the simulation of reality.

MS: It's very effective as a simulated reality, because the sound is rich and the lighting is so even. You feel you're seduced into this experience where you want to blur your focus a little and make it real. You'll see one of the strings pulling the toy cars and then you'll try not to see it. You fool yourself into a process of trying to make it seem more real than it is.

CL: Exactly. It's about that perceptual edge where all we are walking between accepting reality and questioning it, or town with stores and traffic and cafés and not permanent population. Every city has an airport and a stadium and maybe a convention center that function as symbols of civic pride, but really have nothing to do with community. These are spaces that are normally ignored. Paul Virilio says we no longer populate cities, we now populate the time spent changing places. Can you make cut out of that? The Executive Air Traveler, which began as a sent photo project, locates itself in just such a place. It's better as photos than video, because in a series of photos you realize that while each is identified as a different city, you can really tell; all airports look the same. The repetitious activity conceals them. They are one place.


CL: Top Gun uses a different kind of spatial marginality to counteract the film's self-importance. Top Gun, the film, was about competitiveness, the myth of being "the best," and the airplane as ultimate motocycle, a big powerful thing between the legs. It was inserted in the spaces that are required to support this large scale, military operation—the runways, the number of hours, the terrain where they sit for hours while they're being prepared for flight—all that kind of leftover space. It's an attempt to disymmetry in the tape when you see an enlisted man kicking a can of grease across the runway en route to serving a $36 million jet fighter you get a nice metaphor for the contradictions inherent in military spending.

MS: In the most recent work, you seem to be dealing a little more directly with issues of masculinity. For instance, in Baliplayer there is a sense of male bonding and the game as a way for this character to get through his romantic disaffiliation. It's a turning away from women and romance and returning to the male folk. In Not Top Gun, it's looking at male aggression and the phallic imagery of these machines, and then necessarily you play with the mind, where you're almost trying to indentify him into the correct way of building a model. Is this very conscious on your part?

CL: I don't see Baliplayer as being about baseball, but about using baseball as a convenient system to talk about loyalty. Structurally, the tape is bracketed by two impersonal spaces—the airport and the stadium—to contract with the most personal, intimates appeared. I was interested to talk about loyalty initially on the level of the individual and what loyalty means in a relationship. Then it moves to another level, which is the professional, and the question is what kind of loyalty does it have to the city that houses it? Not very much these days. The fans remain more loyal than the players, or perhaps the city, or the owners. Hopefully Baliplayer is a way of affirming the individual against the social contract. The value of amateur competition as a way of reaffirming one's self-esteem with the scale of professional sports, which the stars are convenient to.

Not Top Gun began as a two-channel installation without clips from the film. There was one channel of the adult and boy building the model, and a second channel of the planes at Miramar Naval Air Station taking off and landing. The model building activity was shot without a script, but with all the information available about the plane to answer potential questions. My style of "indoctrinating" the boy, Tim Hatch, in building a model was not consciously acted on my part, or his, but just came from the rigor I bring to that kind of project. He had to be up to those standards. So it was a surprising subject that I felt should be left in because it made another statement. What is training? How is information transmitted, not simply in learning a task, or learning facts or figures?


MS: One way of looking at how you deal with these icons, to get back to my original question, would be to look at space. Much of what Art Farm did was a mapping of space in Baliplayer and Not Top Gun.

CL: The airplane is an extension of the automobile and they are both at the center of industrial society's technocratic myth of the machine. The inspiration for the Cadilac tailfin was the P-38 fighter plane. In fact Harley Earl, who was head of styling at General Motors during the 1940s and 1950s, described planes as his primary influence in the design of all G.M. cars.

But these two pieces also deal with architecture, and concepts of space and marginality. One is the airport, which is a space designed to be moved through, and one is a model of a little
could only be done in the collective environment such as that of Ant Farm and T.R.U.Ocean. It was like a dare that Rosenfeld felt was necessary. He was working on one basic strategy, which was to work from the Zapruder image as a kind of hook that only the collective would work on. MS: Is there persevering the reenactment in the tape keep saying that it’s in bad taste. You have the sense of being alone. It’s a closed-rehearsal project. You suddenly make a sudden coming upon Cadilllac Ranch Media Burn and The Eternal Frame seem structured for shock value. It raises issues about the necessity that people don’t read the terms of guerrilla tactics without really exploring the very few that are available. It has implications of warfare and subversion and to apply it to these kinds of events? How did you perceive it at the time? 

CL: It was thrilling to be shockingly in bad taste. It didn’t seem to fit into museums or galleries or even alternative spaces. It was a direct practice, a very public, direct form of art making. Cadilllac Ranch has no plaque on it or fence around it. We had to create our own audience for both Media Burn and The Eternal Frame. 

MS: You incorporate that in The Eternal Frame. The effect that it had on the people watching is one of the most important aspects of the tape. 

CL: We didn’t know that sounds would show up at Dealey Plaza at 7 a.m. on Sunday morning, but they did and they became part of the overall event. Their resonances are spontaneous and genuine in contrast to our carefully planned sounds that were there without permission, but they seemed to think we were an official reenactment. 

CL: In Ant Farm, we were interested in a radical practice. Media Burn was really an attempt to the newscasters who had to cover it. It was interesting to see these news people deal with it, for they are always in a position of power when they show up to cover an event. They resisted Media Burn because it was non-reality. Of course their reaction is to deliver the cynical “pigeon story,” which we used in our tape to comment on that TV news format. We also believed that the burn image, injected into the news flow, would be read as a radical intervention. 

MS: It raises an interesting question about the nature of critique. Is this a form of mass media, but you couldn’t control how the media would interpret your critique. They formed it in their own way, but we also wanted the image, and they used it. So some of it against you, too?

CL: The original broadcasts and the tape function very differently. Certainly a much larger audience saw the TV coverage, but few I would imagine were awakened. When you see the tape through the whole black and white tape unfold before them, when it cuts from the reporter on the scene to the newscaster in the studio and says, “What does it all mean? I think it was over all their heads. And had it been?

MS: So it plays back forth.

CL: It is possible that some viewers might be surprised by seeing it on the news, but they can understand it as critique. This idea of surprise is really a kind of Brechtian device, the breathing space that allows people to think it’s relevant. The notion of audience for video because these tapes play best when they’re broadcast and that surprise occurs to somebody sitting at home. It’s an interruption in the seamless flow. It’s complexity and contradiction, which television isn’t.

MS: I’d like to talk about the notion of the image as copy, because it seems to me to be relevant to Media Burn and The Eternal Frame. In The Eternal Frame, the president says: I suffered my image death on the streets of Dallas, TX, August 10, 1975. In order to render our ultimate serving of the image, and without which I would be nothing. I’d like to emphasize that no president can die in the real world, but he can in the image. 

CL: The Eternal Frame is about taking the basic image that actually came to replace the event in our consciousness, and remaking it. It also brings up the notion of reenactment means. On one level, it’s just black and white stills of the Johnsons walking in the Lincoln Bedroom, in other words, your reenactments chip away at its authenticity. You reinsert and people respond to it—they cry for help. 

CL: The Eternal Frame was an exploration of what degree we had to redo to recreate the image. The target was the spectator’s desire, to quote Doug Hall. Since there was an image already in everybody’s head, apparent from the Eames image of the president riding on a white horse. That was the ideal point. Simplicity in Easy Living you can allow yourself to be seduced and to buy the illusion, and there may be a pleasure in doing that, but then in the new shot there’s going to be something to push you back that says, “Whoops, this is obviously a trick. This is not the real thing, it’s a clever construction.

MS: How do you look back on Ant Farm, the collective, now? 

CL: For me it was a graduate education, and a total commitment that I could not make to a traditional architectural education. There was a logic that the collective. There were the counter-cultural notions of the 1960s, but also because we were trained as architects, there was a process of working in teams. So it could be viewed as an alternative architecture practice or "underground architecture," which is where the name Ant Farm comes from. I think a collective can be very empowering. There’s a collective identity and it has the advantage of purging self-doubt. When it’s successful, it creates work that adds up to more than the individual contributions. 

MS: How do you feel about the way that the collectives were historically. 

CL: Well, there’s one aspect to it that is the myth. Many people have heard of it and might know of Cadilllac Ranch and Media Burn in the post office. And don’t really know, what Ant Farm was, so it has an aura of mystery. Students today seem fascinated by the notions of collective and shared practice. There were very optimistic scenarios of what these collectives were going to do in the early 1970s and that optimism was a kind of shared confidence with all the other collectives. When did you decide that it wouldn’t be possible to do it?

From the photo series "Executive Air Travel" (1981) by Chip Lord.
it in the text. Many people value that image without really investigating what it means. It has become a useful symbol and with all those postcards out there it is hard to control it or maintain proprietary rights.

MS: So the issue of ownership becomes important. Art Farm sued the Hard Rock Cafe for replicating Cadillac Ranch on the roof of the restaurant. What ever happened?

CL: Cadillac Ranch was erected in 1974 and I think the Cadillac went up at the Hard Rock Cafe in Los Angeles in 1969. It was about a year later that we sued; we found a Beverly Hills lawyer who would take the case in exchange for art. But we essentially got owned by manhandled legally. The suit was filed in state court and the Hard Rock lawyers filed for a change of venue to federal court, saying that copyright is a matter of federal law. We had a press conference and I think we won the battles in the media; seeing the photograph of the two side by side made the point in the newspaper. Our lawyer told us that this was not a big-money case, that what was at stake was information. That's what we're doing.

The funny thing is that three years later, Hard Rock Cafe actually commissioned us to design a sculpture for them, something for Houston, Texas. It means we built another piece in Texas.

MS: So you created this image, and there's no doubt that they ripped off your image, but isn't there a point at which rected to the fear of its destructive power as evidenced in the bomb. This attempt to mobilize nuclear anxiety presents itself as benevolent, clean, and organized. I saw that nostalgia in your work and in Art Farm, although it seems a very ambivalent looking back.

CL: The car culture represented a moment of indulgence, baroque, ridiculous, self-important styling—styling as opposed to design. It seemed ironic in the context of what had happened during the 1960s. To me, Vietnam was important with respect to changing cultural notions of technology, especially high tech war. You saw in those jits with missiles, computers, and radar, and how can you possibly build something that's compatible with you? Some fundamental attitudes toward technology were challenged in the 1960s.

The piece I'm working on now, Motorist, restates those issues as personal history. In it a single character driving a car across the country describes growing up in the 1950s and 1960s. We learn his personal history through memoir-style flashbacks that have been financed in his contrast to the solid boredom of the highway. We also learn the history of the car he's driving, and some stuff about the Ford Motor Company. When he gets to L.A. he starts seeing his memories play back to him from billboards and television clips, and the whole pace gets more frantic. At the end we learn that he's delivering this car to a Japanese buyer, so he is American psyche?

CL: Maybe both. These people were living on a billboard on Sunset Strip in Los Angeles. I was interested in marginal spaces, and the space had an overall of homelessness. What attracted me the most were these ads high structures, built by people living on a billboard, five or six people constructing bare minimum survival structures because they had to stay on this billboard. That was probably the most marginal of all for Munster and Brenda Miller and me—it seemed like it really was an event that Baudrillard could get into because it sucked all the energy out of the signifier. The billboard was an ad for a product, and the contest was a promotion for the product. And this attempt by the manufacturer of the product to capitalize and gain free publicity totally backfired in the sense that the product became lost in the process. We actually interviewed people who didn't know there was a product. So the commodity gets marginalized. And as a billboard it was an extension of automobile space. That's why I attempted to reconstruct the experience by shooting the drive down Sunset, arriving at the billboard, and then talking to the story as a dialogue between two people in a car.

MS: What is so really shocking in the Media Hostage situation is the importance that it takes on for those people, that they are actually living there. It's extraordinarily depressing.

CL: It's a situation of homelessness, because their structures are like the homeless—they are out in the elements—but it's a privileged model of it because they were getting catered meals and they could go down four times a day and eat a bathroom next door. It occurred about the time that homelessness became a national media presence, so it's an ironic counterpart to homelessness in the Reagan era.

MS: They're inscribed within this consumer space, advertising space, but it's not as it always have in that context. And you think about the boredom and the, in fact. So in contrast to what advertising tries to present to us, which is an empy of these people with their exciting lives, this is just the drudgery of consumerism, when you have to go buy something and you have to live for two hours into it, and you just can't stand it any more.

CL: It's so great that it backfired. The motive of exploiting the situation was so clearly evident, but it showed up instead the seduction of consumerism and the difficulty of constructing spectacle in the "society of the spectacle." It was an event we could identify with because we are all "media hostages."