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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 seemingly more staid position of a university 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 eras. Lord continues to be an artist observing and critiquing aspects of popular culture. In choosing to interview Lord, I was interested in precisely this question of how artists such as Ant Farm are historicized.

Chip Lord was born in 1944 and graduated with a degree in architecture from Tulane University in 1968. That same year, he cofounded Ant Farm with Doug Michels as an art and architecture group. Shortly thereafter, Curtis Schreier and Hudson Marquez joined the group. Because most of Ant 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 decidedly interdisciplinary, producing works that combined performance, media, sculpture, and architectural and graphic design. Couched sometimes in a prankish humor, Ant Farm's projects embodied much of the ideology of the 1960s; as an embrace of the notion of a mobile, non-stationary culture, they designed inflatables as architectural alternatives and explored the country in their traveling "Media Van." However, the group was also concerned with remapping the American psyche of the 1940s and 1950s, always with an eye toward the rapid technological change of the postwar era. They produced several "time capsules," in which soon-to-be obsolete objects were buried for future inspection, and chose the automobile as their central icon of both Americana and the embrace of technology.

Ant Farm's best-known works achieved notoriety precisely because they produced images that symbolized an ambivalent critique of technology as manifested in the automobile: *Cadillac Ranch* (1974) is a sculpture of ten Cadillacs, buried nose down in a row along Route 66 in Amarillo, TX, so that their tailfins rise out of the horizontal landscape; *Media Burn* (1975) was an event and videotape, in which Ant Farm members drove a remodeled 1959 Cadillac through a burning wall of television sets. The tape of *Media Burn* effectively lambasted broadcast television styles and produced an image that has come to symbolize the rage of the viewer/consumer. In 1976, in collaboration with the collective of T.R. Uthco (Doug Hall, Jody Procter, Diane Hall), Ant Farm produced *The Eternal Frame*, in which they reenacted the assassination of President John F. Kennedy as seen in the famous Zapruder film. A combination of camp (Doug Hall played Kennedy, Doug Michels was Jackie) and serious critique of the notion of history as dictated by the camera image, *The Eternal Frame* is a work that has resurfaced in the 1980s amid discussions of the status of the real and the copy.

In 1978, a fire destroyed Ant Farm's studio in San Francisco, at a point when its members were already working as individuals, and the group officially disbanded. Since that time, Lord, who has become the "archivist" of Ant Farm over the years, has produced works individually and in collaboration with other artists. Many of these works follow some of the central concerns of Ant Farm, such as the cultural role of the automobile and concepts of space. *Easy Living* (1984), a collaboration with collector Mickey McGowan, can be seen as both a critique and fond glimpse of middle America and leisure time. Miniature cars and plastic human figures play out classic day-in-the-life narratives at the beach, golf course, drive-in, and late-night drag race, in vignettes that often seem eerily realistic. Coming full circle on the issue of the car as icon, *Auto Fire Life* (1984) intercuts images of cars taken from broadcast television with news footage as commentary on the global politics of our oil-based economy. Lord turned from the issue of technology as manifested in the automobile to the fetishizing of the airplane with *Not Top Gun* (1987), a tape produced for Paper Tiger Television, which deconstructs the popular film *Top Gun* (1986, directed by Tony Scott). The

tape begins with Lord doing a pseudo-military introduction in the kind of space he defines as "marginal," the parking lot of a fast-food restaurant across the street from Miramar Naval Air Station in San Diego. The tape intercuts elegantly shot images of the F-14 planes at Miramar taking off and landing, overlaid with detailed statistics about the cost and maintenance apparatus of the planes, with excerpts of the music video taken from the film. Interspersed with this are scenes of Lord and a young boy building a model of an airplane, which serve to implicate the artist within the cultural dynamic of boys and machines that he is critiquing.

In recent years Lord has turned more directly to narrative. In 1985, he produced a segment of the tape *Media Hostages* (two other segments were produced by Branda Miller and Antonio Muntadas), about an advertising gimmick in which contestants aimed to see who could live the longest on a billboard on Sunset Strip to advertise an article of electronic jewelry, the "Winkie." Lord created a scene in which two characters drive down Sunset Blvd., discussing 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-image? 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, rationality went out the window and the stylists had all the power in Detroit. Kids could identify every make and model and gleefully anticipated the new car introductions in the fall. Dream cars were truly futuristic; tailfins kept growing bigger, and by 1957 you had three-tone paint jobs, push-button transmissions, bullet bumpers, "autonic" 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 Amarillo News Tapes* (1980) by Chip Lord, Doug Hall, and Jody Procter. Left to right: Bill Tell Zortman, Doug Hall, Jody Procter, and Chip Lord.

the viewer from the narrative construction. The more recent *Ballplayer* (1986) uses the device of storytelling to address issues of relationships, self-esteem, and personal and impersonal space. Framed by images of the airport and a baseball stadium, actor Richard Marcus sits alone in front of the camera and recounts a personal story—his girlfriend dumps him in an airport bar, and after months of despair, he redeems himself through a surprise catch in a baseball game. Lord is currently in production on a new script, *Motorist*.

Chip Lord's work has been widely exhibited throughout the United States and Europe. He has had solo exhibitions of his videotapes at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Long Beach Museum of Art, and the International Center of Photography, and his tapes have been included in exhibitions such as the Paris Biennale, Documenta, and the National Video Festival, and broadcast and cablecast in the U.S. and abroad. He has been a designer for *Guerrilla Television* and other publications, and wrote and designed *Automerica* (E.P. Dutton, 1976). From 1982 to 1986, Lord taught in the visual arts department of the University of California, San Diego, and since 1987 he has been teaching at the University of California, Santa Cruz. This interview is an edited transcript from two interviews which took place on May 6 and April 10, 1988 in Santa Cruz. It includes additions and revisions by both participants.

**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 tailfin. 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 was there a very conscious decision at one point to take 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, Ant 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 rent-a-cops, and souvenir stand. It had a logo and we designed the souvenir programs and press passes as well as the event itself. We worked on *Media Burn* 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* Ant Farm positioned the automobile as this fantastic symbol—the car of the future, the "phantom dream car," with lots of gizmos and electronic devices. It's like a spaceship in which we, the audience, are

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# AN INTERVIEW WITH CHIP LORD

going forward with you, the performers, and we're smashing things. Then in *The Eternal Frame*, it is the symbol of the motorcade. Later, in *Easy Living*, the people are so static, they're one-dimensional. There's nothing alive about them, but the cars are very animated. We invent narratives around the cars; the machine takes over and the human being recedes into the background. I find *Auto Fire Life* by comparison to be a rather cynical vision. It says we have this icon of the car, but look at the political implications of it—that we have this petroleum-based economy that is doomed. It seems that you've come a long way on this issue.

**CL:** It's a complex issue and a continuing investigation for me. *Easy Living* looks at one part of it, and there are several possible readings: some people view it as a social commentary on the cultural and intellectual emptiness of suburbia; others see a loving portrait of an American small town. Since it uses as material these toys that are mass produced and consumed by children, some people see it as a critique of the consumer cycle. But I think children invest those

seeing signs that it's not exactly real. We used traditional narrative constructions that lead you normally into a suspension of disbelief. But those conventions usually support a plot structure and sympathetic characters. We structured the piece without a plot, it's more like surveillance—a day in the life of the fictional Westgate—so the audience has to participate in completing the piece, which they seem to do with great variety.

**MS:** You move from the automobile as icon to its replacement with the airplane in *Ballplayer* 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 Cadillac 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, a model of a little

and returning to the male fold. In *Not Top Gun*, it's looking at male aggression and the phallic imagery of these machines, and then the way you interact with that kid, where you're almost trying to indoctrinate him into the correct way of building a model. Is this very conscious on your part?

**CL:** I don't see *Ballplayer* as being about baseball, but about using baseball as a convenient system to talk about loyalty. Structurally, the tape is bracketed by these two impersonal spaces—the airport and the stadium—to contrast with the most personal, intimate narrative. The idea is to talk about loyalty—initially on the level of the individual and what loyalty means in a relationship. Then it moves to another scale, which is the professional sports franchise: what sort 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 the politicians or the owners of the teams. Hopefully *Ballplayer* is a way of affirming the individual against these social institutions. I wanted to contrast the value of amateur competition as a way of reaffirming one's self-esteem with the scale of professional sports, which the stadium is a convenient symbol of.

*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 these standards. So it was a surprising subtext that I felt should be left in because it made another statement. What is training? How is information passed on? It's 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 Ant Farm did was a mapping of the American terrain, American space, and, within that, the American psyche, with the car as an indicator. Works like *Cadillac Ranch* and the *Truck Stop Project* seem to be about how the automobile remaps the space of the United States, and now you are addressing how the airplane does that as well.

**CL:** I'm fascinated by air travel and how quickly it supplanted the rail system, leaving behind some incredible monuments—the train stations of the first half of the century. So I guess there's an aspect of historicism to this mapping. With *Cadillac Ranch* we were thinking about the whole history of Route 66 and roadside architecture and that period before the corporate chains took over, when every motel had a unique design. *Cadillac Ranch* depends on its site, which is very horizontal. Most people have been driving for hours—they are in "road space" when they discover it. It's public art for motorists, and it's a historical monument.

**MS:** What does Texas represent as an icon? The most American, real Americana?

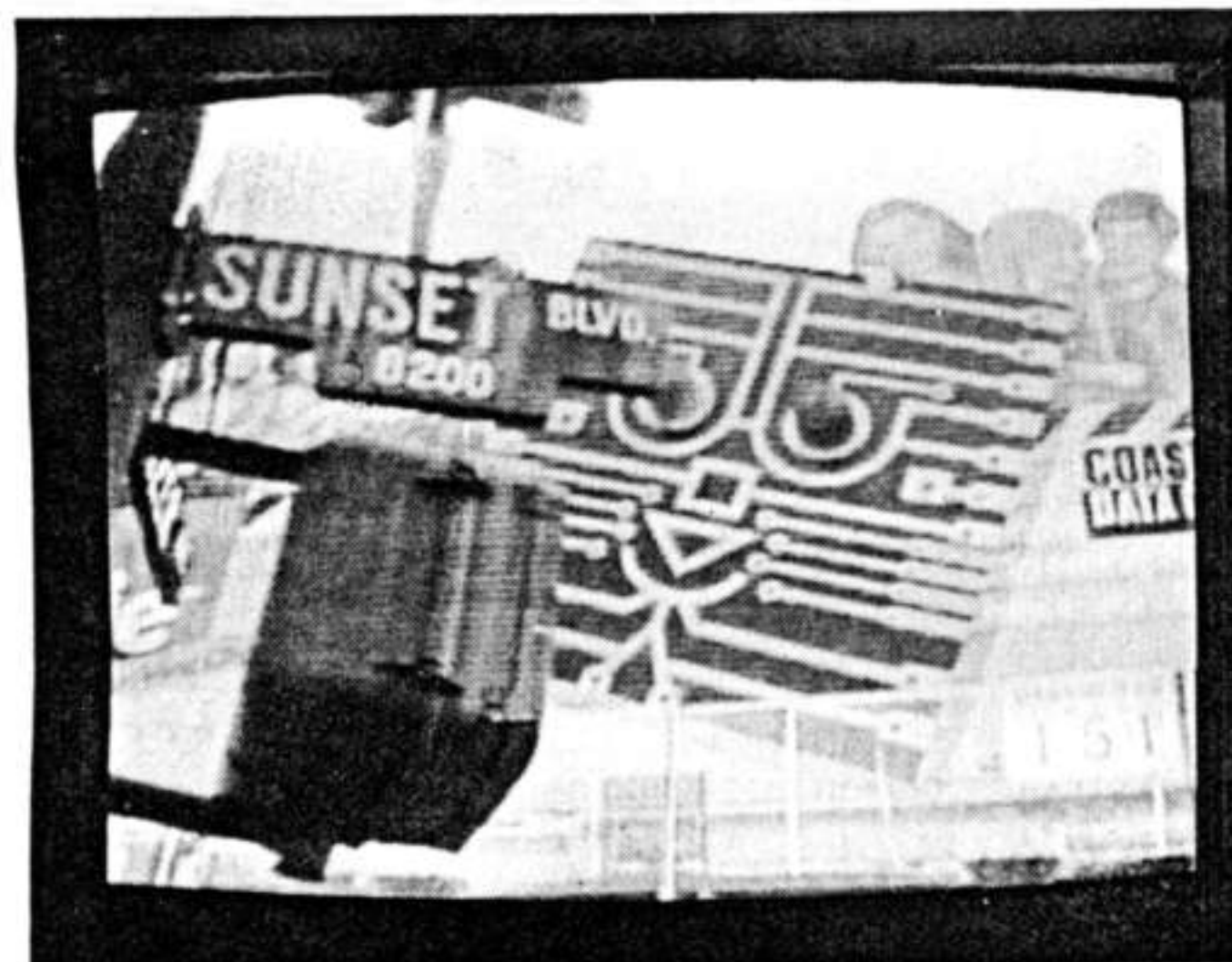
**CL:** It has a high profile, having to do with rugged individuality, the Western myth, cowboys and astronauts, skyscrapers and oil wells. And for us it really did provide an opportunity to work. People in Texas were willing to take a risk to fund the kind of projects we proposed.

**MS:** *The Eternal Frame* raised the issue of history constructed as an image. I am intrigued by this notion, because I've been thinking in terms of comparing photography, film, and video as factors in memory. Most photographs are coded history and memory to us. And film too, although it is about movement and a coming into the present, is now a medium of history. But electronic imagery is still very much the immediate, which is related to transmission and simultaneity. In *The Eternal Frame* you are reenacting this historical piece of film on videotape, taking it out of the film image, which is coded history, and placing it within the immediate. The image of Kennedy being shot was probably the first incident in which history was encapsulated into an image in such an emphatic way. Kennedy was our first media president and we experienced his death via TV. What does it mean then that we are experiencing this through an image? Does it mean that we have a very superficial understanding of this event?

**CL:** You could look at it as the point at which television begins to eclipse *Life* magazine as the recorder of contemporary history. We experienced the event through television, but the primary images were frozen in *Life* magazine. The Zapruder film began as amateur footage—the act of staking out a place, seeing the motorcade, and shooting the film. *Life* magazine bought it from Abraham Zapruder for, I believe, \$300,000, and it went into the vault. They sent it to the lab to make enlargements and a copy got bootlegged. The next week individual frames were enlarged for *Life* magazine, but it wasn't long before assassination conspiracy buffs acquired copies of the film.

**MS:** So the film goes from amateur status to media hype status to status as evidence.

**CL:** Evidence, but also a copyrighted product. By 1973 it was virtually in the public domain and someone gave us a multi-generation bootleg copy. I think our decision to reenact the assassination of John Kennedy was something that



Top left: frame from *Abseam (Framed)* (1981) by Chip Lord. Top right: frame from *Media Hostages* (1985) by Chip Lord, Branda Miller, and Antonio Muntadas. Bottom: frames from *Not Top Gun* (1987) by Chip Lord.

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 Fire Life* is the flip side of those dreams. It's deconstructing the news and emphasizing the cynicism that's a subtext in network news, the kind of "view from above" attitude. It commingles the glamor of car ads with the drudgery of the everyday—so you see traffic shots from helicopters, street traffic in Beirut, and images of the world petroleum economy. All the footage is recorded from television news. It's like a fictional "Gas War." It's the dark side of Auto America, you might say.

*Auto Fire Life* and *Easy Living* are, themselves, obsessive activities. *Auto Fire Life* was an obsessive collecting, categorizing, and recontextualizing—as T.S. Eliot put it, "the labor of sifting, combining, constructing, expurgating, correcting, testing: this frightful toil is as much critical as creative." *Easy Living* was a collaboration in which Mickey McGowan 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 evocative. You feel yourself 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 feel yourself go through a process of trying to make it seem more real than it is.

**CL:** Exactly. It's about that perceptual edge where we all are walking between accepting reality and questioning it, or

town with stores and traffic and cafés but no 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 art out of that? The *Executive Air Traveler*, which began as a serial 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't really tell; all airports look the same. The repetitious activity connects them. They are one place.

*Not 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 motorcycle, a big powerful thing between the legs. I was interested in the spaces that are required to support this large scale, military operation—the runways, the number of man-hours, the tarmac where they sit for hours while they're being prepared for flight—all that kind of leftover space. It's an attempt to demystify. In the tape when you see an enlisted man kicking a can of grease across the runway en route to servicing 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 *Ballplayer* there is a sense of male bonding and the game as a way for this character to get through his romantic disillusionment. It's a turning away from women and romance



could only be done in the collective environment such as that of Ant Farm and T.R.Uthco. It was like a dare that nobody could back away from. We agreed on the basic strategy, which was to work from the Zapruder image as a kind of truth—the only truth.

**MS:** Some people watching the reenactment in the tape keep saying that it's in bad taste. You have the sense of it being a taboo subject. You just don't reenact a national event of such emotional importance, or such a charged image of history.

**CL:** True. It was daring because it was culturally taboo. Given then the idea of reenacting it, the only thing to go by was the media image, which was so firmly burned into the collective consciousness that it became myth. But I think *The Eternal Frame* was more about the media event of the assassination than the assassination itself. It's about our memory of it, which is largely shaped by media.

**MS:** I would like to talk a bit about the notion of guerrilla tactics, like the person driving through Texas and all of a sudden coming upon *Cadillac Ranch*. *Media Burn* and *The Eternal Frame* seem structured for shock value. It raises issues of good and bad taste. It seems that people use terms about guerrilla tactics without really exploring them very much. What did it really mean to take that term with all its 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. *Cadillac 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 do 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 tourists would show up at Dealey Plaza at 7 a.m. on Sunday morning, but they did and they became our extras and our validation. Their reactions are spontaneous and genuine in contrast to our carefully planned but awkward performance. We were there without permission, but they seemed to think we were an official reenactment.

In *Ant Farm*, we were interested in a radical practice. *Media Burn* was really an affront to the newscasters who had to cover it. It was interesting to see these news people deal with it, since they are almost always in a position of power when they show up to cover an event. They resented *Media Burn* because it was mock reality. Of course, their reaction was to deliver the cynical "joke 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. You were doing a simulation of mass media, but you couldn't control how the media would interpret your critique. They turned it into a joke, but they also wanted that flashy image, and they used it. So some of it played against you too, didn't it?

**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 news clips after having seen the whole tape unfold before them, when it cuts back from the reporter on the scene to the anchors and one of them says, "What does it all mean? I think it was over our heads!" every audience laughs, because it's so obvious that it was over their heads. And the joke's on them.

**MS:** So it plays back and forth.

**CL:** Yes, I think a lot of 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 breaking of the illusion of the theater. I think it's relevant to 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 artist-president says "I suffered my image death on the streets of Dallas, TX, August 10, 1975, in order to render my ultimate service to the media which created me, and without which I would be nothing. I did this to emphasize that no president can ever again be more than an image and that no image could ever be in the past nor can ever be in the future anything but dead." It's a great line. That this is all pre-Reagan is quite extraordinary. *Media Burn* exists now as an image icon—a postcard. And *The Eternal Frame* is about taking this classic image that actually came to replace the event in our consciousness, and remaking it. It also brings up the notion of what reenactment means. On one level, it's just bad taste. On another level, it has an effect on the "original" image. In other words, your reenactment chips away at its authenticity. You reenact it and people respond to it—they cry—it's just as real to them.

**CL:** *The Eternal Frame* was an exploration of what degree we had to do to recreate the image: "To seduce and to satisfy the spectator's desires," to quote Doug Hall. Since there was an image already in everybody's head, apparently we didn't have to be too authentic. That was really the point. Similarly 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 next shot there's going to be something to push you back that says, whoops, this is obviously a fake. 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 career. There was a logic in working collectively. There were the countercultural notions of the late 1960s, but also because we were trained as architects, there was a precedent of working in teams. So it could be viewed as an alternative architectural 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 have been historicized?

**CL:** Well, there's one aspect to it that is the myth. Many people have heard of it and might know of *Cadillac Ranch* or have seen *Media Burn* postcards and don't really know what Ant Farm was, so it has an aura of mystery. Students today seem fascinated by the notions of collectivity and independence. There were very optimistic scenarios of what these collectives were going to do in the early 1970s and that optimism was a kind of fuel.

**MS:** When did you decide that it wouldn't be possible to

ing into something else? Why did everybody suddenly decide that they needed to work as individuals?

**CL:** Within Ant Farm there was real ideological commitment but no economic security. The group offered a certain security, because we were sharing a space and the basic income-producing means, and the collective identity had a certain momentum. But it was a sacrifice—nobody was saving any money—so ultimately how long can you live in that style? You become a business or you dissolve. Happily we parted as friends.

**MS:** Do you feel like you're treated differently as an individual artist than you were as part of a collective? Are you taken more seriously as an individual artist?

**CL:** The challenge for me was establishing myself as an identity separate from Ant Farm. The work I did in that period (1978-81) was more personal and much of it deals with constructing an identity—the *Executive Air Traveler* and *Bi-coastal*, and as the weathercaster in *Amarillo News Tapes*. I was searching for the post-Ant Farm identity. Teaching appealed to me at the time because it seemed to offer a collaborative intellectual environment.

Ant Farm ended in 1978 when a fire destroyed our studio. The irony is that everything was destroyed except the slides and videotapes, because of where they were located and how they were packaged. So that we came out of it



From the photo series "Executive Air Traveler" (1981) by Chip Lord.

practice alternative architecture?

**CL:** Actually we moved into media, but never gave up the architectural practice. *Cadillac Ranch* and *Media Burn* are like these large scale architectural projects in terms of the work process. They went through various design and production stages and required supervision and management, image management. They staked out some territory in the art world. They had some media impact and they remain active as images.

**MS:** It's interesting that it really is as *still* images that they've had this kind of longevity.

**CL:** I think sales of *Media Burn* postcards are dropping off now, but there are over 100,000 in print. Famous buildings, sculpture, and monuments also exist as postcards so it was a natural distribution format. Postcards are mass culture too.

**MS:** It seems that the way the collectives have been historicized has been very simplistic. The standard description is that in the 1960s there were these collectives with considerable idealism about what they were going to accomplish. Then in the "me" generation of the 1970s, they disbanded and all went off to make television by themselves. Obviously it was a lot more complex than this kind of formula can suggest.

**CL:** It was a very exciting time—discovering the network that was out there, principally through *Radical Software*, and then traveling and meeting people. With Ant Farm we just went out and bought a portapak because we were interested in media. It was very process-oriented; we used it as a diary and a way of interacting creatively. Video fit into a social consciousness which for us revolved around a philosophy of impermanence and nomadism—being on the road and spreading the word. Architecturally, we built inflatable structures as an alternative to traditional heavy reinforced concrete buildings. And video was fast and cheap and portable like the inflatables.

**MS:** Do you think that most collectives just couldn't survive into the late 1970s or 1980s? Was there something in the ideologies of these groups that prevented them from evol-

with documentation that fit into one steamer trunk.

**MS:** So you ended up with only camera images—the image documentation for history. How does your role as archivist now fit into this? You are required to construct narratives around your own history and around Ant Farm's history. It is sad but also a wonderfully ironic image that you lost everything but the camera documentation of it, which is basically what will eventually happen to other people anyway. All you're left with is a box of snapshots. Are artists all going to be archivists? Is that a necessary role for them to play?

**CL:** I ended up as the archivist for Ant Farm so I get most of the inquiries, but it means constantly checking with the others because the collective decision-making process is still in effect. It's not always easy, but I feel a responsibility to do it. It's great to place the work in an institution because preservation then becomes their responsibility and they are better equipped to do it than I am.

**MS:** Yes, but it's never unproblematic. For instance, institutions like the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum, and the Long Beach Museum of Art are defining video history with their collections, but in the process they circumscribe the many histories involved. A lot of work that doesn't "fit" museum contexts gets left out.

**CL:** True, they make choices that shape the history. But the artists need those institutions or there doesn't exist any validation for the work. How much early work has already been lost? Some artists are just not going to be good archivists or good at self-promotion. Ant Farm functioned outside institutions for the most part, and I think it really benefited from being self-invented and self-produced.

**MS:** But what does that validation of history mean? Ant Farm has moved from being a guerrilla organization very much outside the institutional realm, to being very much within that history and those institutions. It has a specific slot, it is the "zany" collective from San Francisco.

**CL:** I wouldn't use that word, but it does get typecast. Only a portion of the body of work is shown or, for instance, the photo of *Media Burn* gets used in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, but there's not a word relating to



it in the text. Many people value that image without really investigating what it meant. It has become a useful symbol and with all those postcards out there it is hard to control it or to maintain proprietary rights.

**MS:** So the issue of ownership becomes important. Ant 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 1980. 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 out maneuvered 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 battle 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 you basically want is to get the information out, and that's what you've done. The funny thing is that three years later, Hard Rock Cafe actually commissioned us to design a sculpture for their new restaurant in Houston. Ironically, it meant 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

connected to the fear of its destructive power as evidenced in the bomb. This attempt to mollify nuclear anxiety presents technology as benevolent, clean, and organized. I see that nostalgia in your work and in Ant Farm, although it seems a very ambivalent looking back.

**CL:** The car culture represented a moment of indulgent, baroque, ridiculous, self-important styling—styling as opposed to design. It seemed ironic in the context of what had transpired during the 1960s. To me Vietnam was important with respect to changing cultural notions of technology, especially high-tech warfare. You send in those jets with missiles, computers, and radar, and how can peasant soldiers possibly compete with you? Some fundamental attitudes towards technology were challenged in the 1960s.

The piece I'm working on now, *Motorist*, reframes these 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 memories, flashbacks that he narrates, in contrast to the solitary boredom of the highway. We also learn the history of the car he is driving, and some stuff about the Ford Motor Company. When he gets to L.A. he starts seeing his memories played 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 this space had an overlay of homelessness. What attracted me the most were these ad hoc 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 magnet for all three of us in a way—for Muntadas and Branda 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 get 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 got 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 telling the story as a dialogue between two people in a car.

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

**CL:** It's a simulation 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 use a bathroom next door. It occurred about the time that homelessness became a national media presence, so it's an ironic counterpoint to homelessness in the Reagan era.

**MS:** They're inscribed within this consumer space, advertising space, but it's as if they have no other context. And you think about the boredom and the tedium. So in contrast to what advertising tries to present to us, which is an envy of these people with their exciting lives, this is just the drudgery of consumerism, when you have to go buy something and you're 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 instead the tedium 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."

#### SELECTED VIDEOGRAPHY

*The Cadillac Ranch Show* (1974, by Ant Farm), 14 min., black and white and color.

*Media Burn* (1975, by Ant Farm), 25 min., black and white and color.

*The Eternal Frame* (1976, by Ant Farm and T.R. Uthco), 23 min., black and white and color.

*The Executive Air Traveler* (1979), 6 min., color.

*The Amarillo News Tapes* (1980, with Doug Hall and Jody Procter), 25 min., color.

*Absecon (Framed)* (1981), 11 min., black and white and color.

*Get Ready to March* (1981), 80 min., color.

*Easy Street* (1983, with Mickey McGowan), 6 min., color.

*Bi-Coastal and Three Drugs* (1983), 3 min., color.

*Auto Fire Life* (1984), 7 1/2 min., color.

*Easy Living* (1984, with Mickey McGowan), 18 min., color.

*Media Hostages* (1985, with Branda Miller and Antonio Muntadas), 27 min., color.

*Ballplayer* (1986), 13 min., color.

*Training Maneuvers* (1986), two-channel installation, color.

*Not Top Gun* (1987), 26 min., color.



Production still from *Easy Living* (1984) by Chip Lord and Mickey McGowan: left, McGowan; right, Lord.

it's just a symbol, when it's no longer yours.

**CL:** I'm not a lawyer (but I play one on TV) and I do know that it is difficult to protect a logo, or a name, or an image if you are not already operating at a certain scale, money-wise. You can't copyright the idea; you can only copyright the actual sculpture and the name. We had to view the lawsuit as a media event, as a way of distributing information about our work. From a different viewpoint, I would say that each use of *Cadillac Ranch*, whether authorized or not, becomes part of the history, the life of the piece. I keep a scrapbook of these things and it just keeps on growing.

**MS:** Do you think that historically Ant Farm simply is seen as having an attitude toward television and automobile culture?

**CL:** Due to the high profile of those specific pieces, it gets interpreted as that, although we were continually doing architectural work and other media installation pieces. For instance, there were a series of time capsules, including a 25-year time capsule that was installed at Artpark in 1975. It's a 1967 Oldsmobile Vistacruiser stationwagon. It's buried there until the year 2000. The Citizens of Lewiston, NY were invited to make contributions, and we went to a supermarket and selected consumer products and things like aerosol cans, which have probably exploded by now. That was about the time when the aerosol propellants were determined to be affecting the ozone in the atmosphere, so we decided that in the future there will be no aerosols and we put them in the time capsule.

**MS:** What about the question of retrospection? We're in the 1980s and we're looking back at the 1960s. Inevitably the period from which we look back affects not only how we look back, but also why. Now Vietnam is suddenly everywhere and images from the 1960s are used to sell sneakers. There are obvious reasons why there would be a nostalgia for the 1960s in the 1980s because of how far from certain ideologies we have come, and the entrenching of the conservative movement. But the nostalgia for the car culture of the 1950s seems to be a longing for that naive postwar vision of the future as embodied in technology, the emphasis on the saving power of technology, which is con-

implicated in the selling of American culture to Japan. This will be a one-hour tape and it is more traditionally narrative than anything I've done.

**MS:** I do see a kind of healthy ambivalence, critiquing yet remaining fond of these cultural icons, and always implicating yourself within it. How would you pose yourself as artist, maker, and consumer? When you make a tape that deals with the car culture, you're also positing yourself as someone who operates within a car culture—who owns cars, who's implicated in your critique.

**CL:** I think I've positioned myself as an American. I'm not a celebrity or an expert, but I appear on TV. I see the dark side of speed and power as well as the thrills. I see the manipulative power of media as well as the pleasures. I hope to empower the individual by supplying information, questioning dominant positions, and pointing out flaws in the consciousness industry.

**MS:** This ambivalence is interesting. We can critique all this cultural baggage and iconography; we can flush them out. But we are culturally defined. I guess what I see you dealing with is the sliding of that position.

**CL:** Sure, I love the 1959 Cadillac, no doubt about it, but it's a battle between the emotional side and the intellectual side. From the rational viewpoint, a '59 Cadillac is a ridiculous symbol of conspicuous consumption, and on the emotional side, it's a pretty amazing object—and it does feel great to get behind the wheel of it. I have one parked out front (a Thunderbird, not a Cadillac).

But when you start to look at the economy of oil-based societies and the U.S. share of world resource consumption, it's clear that these large automobiles don't make sense. You have to realize that it is a luxury in relationship to the whole balance of the system. I think that attitude is very different from a consumer who's still buying it and hasn't developed any awareness. It's also very different from the other extreme, which is the hypercritical nonconsumer, who doesn't acknowledge any of the pleasures.

**MS:** Was *Media Hostages* an attempt to critique consumer culture or was it also a mapping out of the space of the

