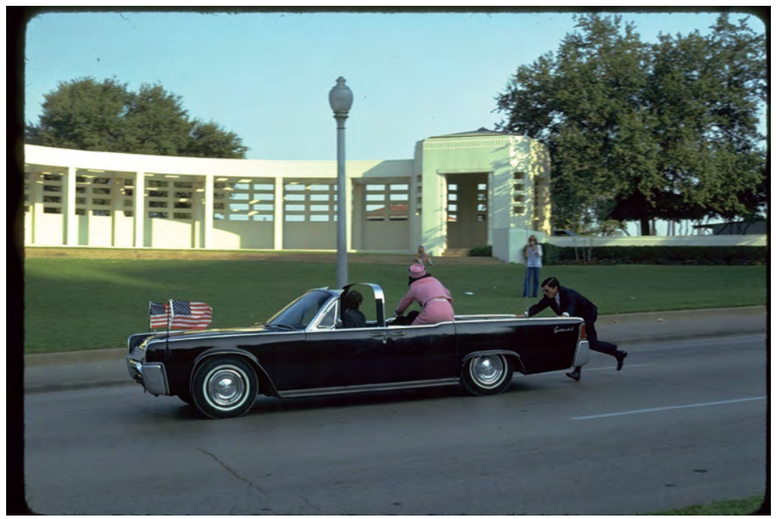
Courtesy: the Ant Farm Archive at University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive



The Eternal Frame by T.R. Uthco and Ant Farm, 1976. University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive

JEFF KELLEY

The Passage through Space into Image

I saw Cadillac Ranch in pictures long before I first passed its upturned tailfins on U.S. Interstate 40 west of Amarillo. The half-buried car bodies seemed surprisingly puny against the wide-open sky of the Texas Panhandle. In the photographs, the cars looked like modern monoliths. Along the highway, they were ungainly hulks nose-down in the dirt, and brought to mind earlier wrecks that long ago had passed this way: the over-heating, loaded-for-broke truck in John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath*, for instance, and the prairie schooners of the late nineteenth century—the Cadillacs of their time.

Cadillac Ranch is the elephant graveyard of the utopian dream-car that carried the American psyche from the blast furnaces of World War II to the blast-offs of the space program. Cadillacs that looked like rocket ships helped us imagine the transition from ordinary space to outer space. That transition was articulated in these cars as the gradual evolution of the tailfin from a bulbous hindquarter to an aerodynamic wake. The ten cars half buried near Amarillo encapsulate the model years between 1949 and 1964, when the nation's consciousness, unable to return to the naiveté of pre-war isolationism, was retrained on the newly menacing stratosphere of orbiting satellites and nuclear trajectories. I remember the night sky above western Pennsylvania in 1957, alight with the delicate traceries of fireflies and the determined arc of Sputnik. Both inspired awe. In 1963 President Kennedy reclaimed outer space for American optimism by committing the nation to landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to earth by decade's end. We had a new frontier. By the time Neil Armstrong set foot on lunar soil the Cadillac had served its psychic purpose. The Organization of Petroleum Exporting States embargoed oil sales to the US in 1973 and the Cadillac suddenly became the prairie schooner of the fossil fuels age. Its meanings have degenerated into stereotypes of racial identification and conspicuous consumption. Its return from orbit was ignominious, literally plowing back into the earth. In 1974 Hudson Marquez, Doug Michels, Chip Lord, and Stanley Marsh—members of the art collective Ant Farm and the iconoclastic patron of Cadillac Ranch—were sipping champagne in front of a row of eco-dinosaurs within sight of Route 66.

Since the 1980s the continuum of space and time through which our dream cars carried us has continued

to collapse. The geophysical world increasingly feels like a backdrop for some other, more instrumental coordinates by which our distracted consciousness is rationalized within a matrix of mediated information, disembodied images, and quasi-experience. Our spatial coordinates are being overtaken by the neural web of emerging global circuitry, the ceaseless transmission of digitized traffic, and the simple Pavolvian choices it offers. Americans in college today have seldom experienced space that wasn't flat, pictorial, and quick to offer them something. Space, for them, is a picture surface—the world is flat once again. I remember space as a dense physical medium, resistant as jello, packed with sensory cues, flooded with light or suspended at the edge of an endless black void. Faraway places—Vietnam, the moon—seemed far away. Distances took a toll on the body and either garbled or fell beyond the range of electronic communications. This, I think, was space-age space, and it could only be penetrated at high speeds by hot-tipped projectiles.

The legacy of Kennedy's challenge that we claim the void between earth and the moon is not the imprint of Neil Armstrong's boot, but the images of it that came falling back to earth as digital code. Like a fine lunar dust, that code is now the penumbra of the planet. The world Ant Farm had wanted to change no longer exists.

With Cadillac Ranch, the dream cars of the space age fell back to earth with a quick succession of Texas thuds. It was not Ant Farm's only collision. The next year, on July 4 1975, the Phantom Dream Car—an aerodynamically modified 1959 Cadillac El Dorado—was driven at high speed through a pyramidal wall of burning television sets in the parking lot of the Cow Palace, near San Francisco. Doug Hall, the artist-president, consecrated the crash with a stirring, Kennedyesque speech, concluding with lines wrestled for the occasion from Lincoln's Gettysburg Address: "The world may never understand what was done here today, but the image created here shall never be forgotten." Moments later, flaming televisions were flying through the air and tumbling to the ground; mission accomplished, the Phantom Dream Car returned to base with its tail fin missing, but otherwise intact. Celebrations all around. A blow had been struck against the mass media's grip on the "free flow of information and images." Judging from the reportorial tone of that evening's local news, representatives of the mass media present that day felt burned indeed. On behalf of all Americans, these hippie artists had put their collective foot through their televisions.

As a performance event, Media Burn was intended to generate images in and for a world of images. As a roadside attraction, Cadillac Ranch was intended to attract the attention of people driving by in cars, but the work's wider legacy lay in its proliferation as a pop-cultural image, not only in art books, but in travel magazines, on posters, road maps, television, or as a kind of iconic echo in the culture, as when we see vintage cars pitched over the entrances of this or that Hard Rock Cafe. The genius of Cadillac Ranch is that it foretells the ultimate forfeiture of space to image by turning a succession of big American automobiles into a sequence of on-site images—in effect, into a filmstrip of steel, rubber, and glass. From behind the wheel, the windshield is like a movie screen anyway, and the passing landscape is its quasi-narrative subject. But here the classic cars themselves are the subjects of a passing audience, if only for a moment. From the sliding perspective of the back seat or the rear-view mirror, the tail fins zip by like the frames in a 8mm movie at 70mph. Instead of a drive-in, we have a drive-by. Like an accident, images of cars suddenly fly across the windshields of other cars. It takes a few miles to realize that you've just been part of a psychic hit-and-run: even on the road, reality has been flattened into images.1 Utopian road-kill, you might say.

Media Burn was essentially a crash test in which an object speeding through space was slammed into a wall designed to frame the electronic illusion of space. The flames at the feet of the televisions were a nice touch, harkening I suppose to some pagan sacrifice—a kind of hippie witch burning— but who at the time would have believed that by the century's end computer literate children throughout the world would speak of burning media onto their personal CDs? In other words, although the results of the crash test took several decades to tabulate, we can now declare with confidence that, despite having been blown apart like government buildings in a Schwarzenegger action movie, the televisions won. It's as if the Phantom Dream Car penetrated the wall of cathode ray vacuum tubes and never came out the other side. The image field absorbed the physical object. If only the televisions had been plugged in, the absorption would have been complete, like gasoline waiting for an electric spark.

As it was, the impact reminds us of what actually happened inside a cathode-ray television to create a picture. Consider the following description, downloaded off the internet:

In a TV's cathode ray tube, the stream of electrons is focused by a focusing anode into a tight beam and then accelerated by an accelerating anode. This tight, high-speed beam of electrons flies through the vacuum in the tube and hits the flat screen at the other end of the tube. This screen is coated with phosphor, which glows when struck by the beam.

My car has a video screen in its dashboard, and is monitored by a satellite in a geo-synchronous orbit. I can see real-time mappings of wherever I am. The car knows where it's been, receives telephone calls, and archives its own electronic history. In other cars, the kids can watch videos, DVDs, and soon, I hear, actual television in the back seat as they wiz along Route 40 toward Amarillo. Meanwhile, back in the future, in the aftermath of the carnage at the Cow Palace, the smoldering remains of television sets were scattered everywhere. As the dream car punched its way through, the central tower of the pyramid had collapsed. The sets directly in front of the Cadillac grille were pulverized into a glittering spray that caught the mid-day haze. The brand names of some sets were un-recognizable, while others—albeit shaken— escaped with minor damage. On the asphalt, cooling like a dying ember, a shattered cathode tube lay close to a severed copper coil.

Media Burn was one of those things that just had to be done, but hadn't been until it was. The arts give us ways of framing and remembering hybrid events such as this, and I suspect we remember it fondly, even those of us who were somewhere else. We may have thought a guerilla war was being incited that independence day, and indeed, the Ant Farm collaborators succeeded in sending the mass media back to hell for a news cycle or two—and, as the Artist-President promised us, the image has indeed lived

on. But as soon as that car entered those televisions the age of space-age space was over.

In the decades since, guerrilla media artists have continued trying to disrupt what David Antin in 1975 called the "tick of the metronome" that drives all corporate media, or to induce those "slow speeds and inhabiting silences" Jonathan Crary hoped might break the circuit between the body and the computer keyboard thirty years ago, in 1984. But the ubiquity of what Crary also called the "disciplinary apparatus of digital culture" is now so complete, so infused with capital and so attractive to a sympathetic global audience, that one can only look back on the collision of July 4, 1975, with nostalgia, trying to reconcile the conceit of youth—of wanting to change the world—with the test, or should I say the crash-test, of time.

The most poignant of Ant Farm's works involving cars took place in Dallas on August 10, 1975, a month after Media Burn. This time the car was a black Lincoln, outfitted to look like the Presidential Limousine in which JFK had been killed a dozen years earlier. It was to be used as a prop in the reenactment in Dealey Plaza not so much of Kennedy's assassination, but of the Zapruder film itself. Collaborating with members of another art collective, T. R. Uthco, Ant Farm was hoping to enact the Artist-President's "image death" on the streets of Dallas. The point, in effect, was to imitate and then videotape a film. As the Artist-President declared, he—that is, Kennedy—could "never again be anything more than an image," so he would undergo assassination as an image, since no image (again, according to the Artist-President) could ever be "anything but dead." Steve Seid, author of *Radical Light: Alternative Film and Video in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1945–2000*, has described the Zapruder footage as encapsulating "the loss of the real." The Eternal Frame would be a confirmation of that loss, with the real-life reenactment of a cinematic sequence of images.

The danger in this enterprise, of course, was to be seen filming a parody of the assassination. Given the setting, Dealey Plaza, the likelihood of stirring local resentment or being regarded as tasteless pranksters—and thus run out of town on a rail—seemed high, and the members of the group were anxious, as Chip Lord put it, "to just get our shots and get out of there."

So they began shooting early in the morning, when few passersby or pilgrims would be present. But they *were* present, as early as 7:30, and the shadows were wrong, so the filming continued, take after take, the President's limousine waiting for the red light on Elm Street to stop other cars so it could snake its way past the Texas School Book Depository, past the odd little colonnade and the infamous grassy knoll, and into the dark underpass toward Parkland Hospital with the secret service man clinging to its trunk—at which point the taping would stop, until the next round. As the takes continued, the spectators kept coming: families mostly, there to visit hallowed ground. Though not in the plan, the filmers wandered about, at first casually, then more purposefully, engaging and interviewing those who had gathered to watch. Many apparently believed the reenactment was a tourist attraction, put on for their benefit; or a government-sponsored reconstruction of the assassination as part of an investigation. None seemed angry. Most seemed transfixed. A few, perhaps, were confused. One woman quietly wept as she watched the scene roll past, later grateful that she had gotten there "just in time." Another man told the story of the assassination to his three children as it was being illustrated on the famous street in front of them by Doug Hall, the Artist-President, and Doug Michels, dressed in drag as Jackie in a pillbox hat—with Stanley Marsh as Governor Connally. Among the onlookers, anyone who had a camera—and many did—began using it, including several people who took their own movies of the moviemakers. The crew was filming the audience that wasn't supposed to be there as the audience was filming the imitation of the Zapruder film, which constituted everybody's memory of the assassination—and this surreal exchange was taking place in Dealey Plaza, where Zapruder had squeezed the trigger on his trusty Bell & Howell. And lest we forget, John Kennedy died there too—now fifty years ago.

In the end, the site conferred upon the reenactment a verisimilitude unanticipated by the cast and crew. The cast and crew responded by taking their roles, which were mostly body language, very seriously, especially Michels, whose Jackie enacted her pathetic backseat choreography with an aching honesty. Clearly, Ant Farm and friends had gone to Dallas expecting to confront not Kennedy, but Zapruder. Just so, "The Eternal Frame" comes down to us as a brilliant meta-document, bristling with the tragic-comic ironies of a post-Camelot culture obsessed with watching itself watching itself. August 10 1975 was the day art and life came face to face and neither blinked. They just recorded.

Still, something genuine and cathartic had taken place. The artists had been ambushed by the uninvited emotions of an unexpected audience on a bright and sunny day in Dallas. At the time, the display of those emotions seemed like further evidence that Americans couldn't tell the difference between reality and representation. But we always cry at movies, especially if the film in question is a memory we all share as film, and especially if we witness its enactment on the hallowed ground where (from which?) it was taken. Hallowed ground, after all, is where the nation's memories are consecrated, no matter which movies they come from. The first time I visited Dealey Plaza, in 1985, my wobbly, kodachromatic memory of Kennedy gliding along a narrow sun-drenched filmstrip toward eternity was suddenly opened to the space, light, shapes, movement, and sounds of the plaza itself. The place seemed bigger in the movie; in the round, it is painfully intimate, the target drifting slowly away from the sniper's nest, interminably visible, as if forever caught in crosshairs.

Every so often, the membrane of the matrix is punctured, but only by that which it cannot imagine. In my lifetime, there are three such American rendings: the assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the *Challenger* explosion, and the terrorist attack of September 11th. These events ambush the mass media, and when they do, all the media's technological resources are reduced to passive recording devices. Cameras quake, reporters sputter, anchorpersons become wide-eyed witnesses to the inconceivable.

Throughout the collective's history, Ant Farm has made its name by pioneering crossings between genre and medium. Trained as architects, its members worked as video artists, graphic designers, performance artists, sculptors, public artists, and mass media provocateurs, a hybridizing style – a kind of viralist architecture of the post-utopian moment – that feels as relevant today as it did in 1974 when the first Cadillac was buried nose-down on the plains of the Texas Panhandle. But from 1974 to 1975 Ant Farm was most spectacular, punching through the barrier separating the space age from the media age, and they did so by staging a series of spectacular collisions: between physical space and recorded imagery, automobiles and television sets, rocket ships and prairie along Route 66, historic films and historic places, performance art and the news media, dead stops and terminal velocities, the highway and the filmstrip, prior futures and future pasts. They tried to penetrate the image world by riding the dream cars—and death cars—of childhood. Cadillac Ranch, Media Burn, The Eternal Frame—underlying each of these is a pioneering metaphor: the passage through space into image, with no clear way back.

A practicing art critic since 1977, **Jeff Kelley** has written reviews and essays for such publications as *Artforum, Art in America,* and the *Los Angeles Times*. From 1993–2005 he taught Art Theory and Criticism at the University of California, Berkeley, and he authored two books on Allan Kaprow published by the University of California Press. Kelley has organized several exhibitions of works by contemporary Chinese artists, such as Sui Jianguo ("The Sleep of Reason," 2005), Liu Xiaodong ("The Three Gorges Project," 2006), and Zhan Wang ("On Gold Mountain: Sculpture from the Sierra," 2008). In addition, Kelley curated the popular and critically acclaimed *Half-Life of a Dream: Chinese Contemporary Art from the Logan Collection* for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (2008), and he currently functions as an advisor on Chinese art to the Logan Collection. An essay on the celebrated Chinese artist, architect, and activist Ai Weiwei will be included in the catalog for the upcoming international Venice Biennale, and he is editing a book for the University of California Press on the artist's writings. He lives in Oakland, California, with his wife, the artist Hung Liu.