

# PETER D'AGOSTINO

Born 1945, New York, New York  
Lives and works in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

**PETER D'AGOSTINO HAS WORKED IN VIDEO** and new media since 1971. Also a theorist and critic, he has published books and articles on technology, semiotics, and identity. Engaging a broad range of discourses including linguistics, media studies, history, aesthetics, physics, and architecture, d'Agostino's body of work constitutes an ongoing investigation of the personal, cultural, and technological communication systems that permeate everyday life. He has synthesized theory and artistic practice in videos, multichannel installations, and interactive works that examine and critique the effects of technology on the individual and society.

Many of d'Agostino's works mobilize the language and techniques of mainstream media in critical investigations of media-driven consumer culture and its information systems. *Quarks* (1979 - 80), for instance, is a critique of television content and reception structured as a series of thirty-second intervals that juxtapose familiar TV patter with a layering of incongruous sounds, images, and text. In his three-part project *comings and goings* (1977-79), d'Agostino explores mass transit systems in Paris, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C., drawing parallels between complex urban infrastructures and social and linguistic communication systems. Dissociation is a prevalent theme throughout the work, made explicit in his 1977 work, *PARIS (Metro)*. A voice-over analyzes the etymological ambiguity of the word metro, while close-circuit surveillance footage of trains and platforms conveys the dissociative experience of passengers in the transit system. "And when you add it all together," the voice-over concludes, "it is a source of confusion"

Andra Darlington

## COME & GO by Kristine Stiles

*COME: 1b: to move toward or enter a scene of action or into a field and of interest whether partly physical or wholly ideal GO: 14a: to come to be: BECOME, b: to undergo a change or transformation.'*

Three phenomena are basic to Peter d'Agostino's art: origins, transformations, and receptions (in the sense of receiving, taking possession or getting; harboring and reacting through response). Selecting aspects of observable reality (manifest in events), he creates works that signify passages and relationships among these three points. In effect, he continually produces art that objectifies the transitive, visualizing movement through structures that incorporate spatial elements in sequence, quantity, and number, through language as symbol, and through the juxtaposition of real and illusory perceptions. His metaphors stay movement between approach and recession, that synaptic juncture where meaning resides and connects to recognition that produces knowledge.

...Given his aim to still the meaning-laden moment in its ephemeral journey between things and experiences, the photograph in its various aspects—from film and video to broadcast television—permits him to freeze-frame observations and intuitions, to re-structure information as parable, and to provide insight through example.

...I have used the word "transit" to highlight synaptic signifying relationships and to describe the ephemeral values inherent in d'Agostino's projects. Not only the media with which he works but also the formal architecture of his pieces conveys the necessity to formulate relationships in two-way communication, a core theme in his art. D'Agostino's shifts—in images of transit—also metaphorically enable spectators to enter into and perform in spaces where they can determine what communication means in the passage between origins and the ways in which movement in everyday activities makes change. Such is the site of reception, where the context for understanding the content of life is interpersonal communication enacted in participation, itself the substance of reception.

The essay by Kristine Stiles and the texts by Peter d'Agostino on pp. 78-81 are adapted from Peter D'Agostino, *comings and goings: NEW YORK (Subway) PARIS (Metro) San Francisco (BART) and Washington (METRO)* (San Francisco: NFS Press, 1982). Used with permission.

## *comings and goings* by Peter d'Agostino

*Comings and goings* represents a body of work concerning mass transportation and communication systems. These projects are explorations of mass transit, focusing on the *subway* as a system which interconnects a city, and the function of "transit" as metaphor: as a conveyor of information and a vehicle for communication. Within the context of a dialectical process, *coming and going* reflects my interest in the juxtaposition of personal and cultural codes of perception, language, structure, and ideology.

*PARIS (Metro), San Francisco (BART), and Washington (METRO)* are video installations incorporating elements of the stilled image and written texts as an integral part of these works.

## NOTE

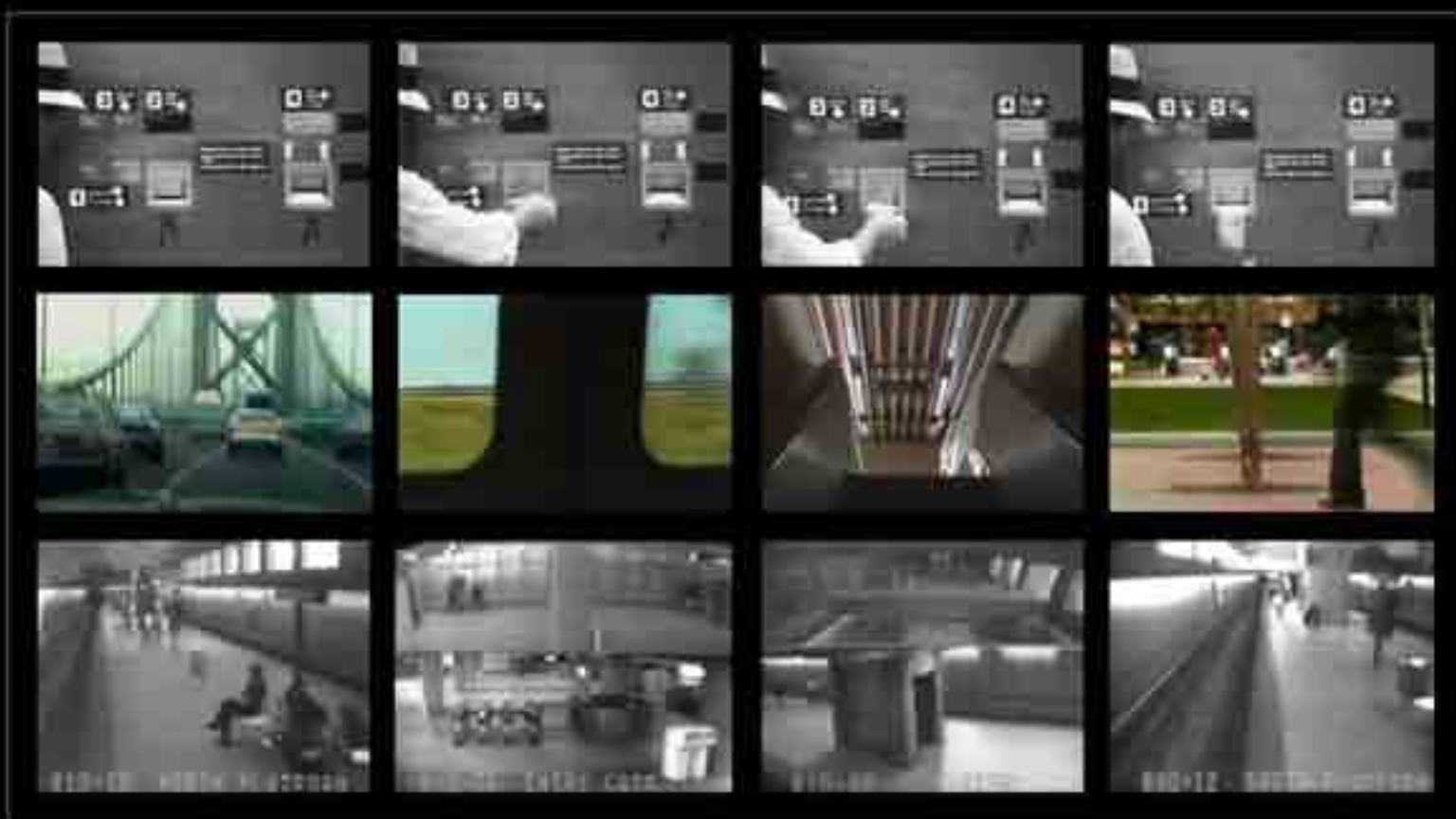
1. The definitions in the title to this essay come from *Webster's Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged*. These two verbs incorporate a wide range of fields of action in which being, becoming, and undergoing change or transformation locate the reader in the domain of d'Agostino's work.



**coming and going: PARIS (Metro), 1977**

Filmed from video surveillance monitors, this videotape follows passengers' underground travel through various stops, transfers, and connections in the Paris Metro. Aspects of ambiguity and confusion experienced in the metro are juxtaposed with a linguistic parallel to the visual image the etymology of the word "metro."

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 Peter d'Agostino: stills from coming  
 and going PARIS (Metro), 1977.  
 Video installation, color, sound.;  
 5 min., 20 sec. loop.



**coming and going: San Francisco (BART), 1978**

The general public and art community were invited to ride the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) from San Francisco's Civic Center to the Berkeley station. The basic structure of the event encompassed the everyday experiences of the BART commuter: buying a ticket, waiting on the platform, boarding and exiting the train, etc. Within this context, the broader framework of BART was investigated, from the inner workings of the system to the outside environment that parallels the underground route of the train. Functioning like an "installation-in-motion," observer/participants carrying portable video equipment with three TV monitors intermingled with other passengers traveling to Berkeley. Carried like luggage, these monitors displayed videotapes which provided passengers with access to several layers of images and information related to the BART experience, including: An automated

ticket machine rejecting dollars as commuters attempt to buy tickets. A car drive from Berkeley to San Francisco, crossing the Bay Bridge while the train travels in the tube beneath the bay. A scene from the master control room shows the progress of the trains through the system, and the surveillance of passengers entering and exiting the stations. A series of personal messages programmed on BART's electronic sign system. These signs are used to announce train arrivals and destinations, display the time of day, and are usually programmed by intermittent advertisements.

My primary concern was the social activity itself and recontextualizing this experience for the BART passengers. Keeping the theatricality of the event to a minimum was necessary to emphasize the work as experience rather than spectacle.



**coming and going: Washington (METRO), 1979**

Designed as a video installation for L'Enfant Plaza station, this work consists of three channels of video on three projection screens overlooking the platform.

On the *screen to the left* is a modified travelogue of Capitol sites, including the White House, the Washington Monument, the Jefferson Memorial, and excerpts from a Redskins football game.

The *screen to the right* shows passengers boarding and exiting trains throughout the system from Airport to L'Enfant Plaza as viewed from television monitors within the METRO's surveillance system.

On the center *screen* is a continuously rolling text: a chronology of historical events that led to the design of the Federal City by architect Pierre L'Enfant. Conveyed through L'Enfant's cor-

respondence with President George Washington and founding father Thomas Jefferson between 1789 and 1792, it summarizes the architect's attempts to implement his master plan and the bureaucratic controversy that led to his resignation and his historical obscurity. (L'Enfant was not officially recognized as the city's original master planner until 1903.)

A separate soundtrack keys the visual images as they phase in and out of synchronous relation. The audiotape is composed of sounds from a METRO ride, music from the revolutionary period, a lecture concerning the politics of operating the METRO system, and a tour guide's brief comments on the history of the District of Columbia.

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 Peter d'Agostino: stills from coming and going, Washington (METRO), 1979. Video installation, color, sound; 8 min., 8 sec. loop.