Social Education 75(6), pp 296–300
©2011 National Council for the Social Studies

Memory of a Nation: Effectively Using Artworks to Teach about the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy

Elizabeth K. Eder

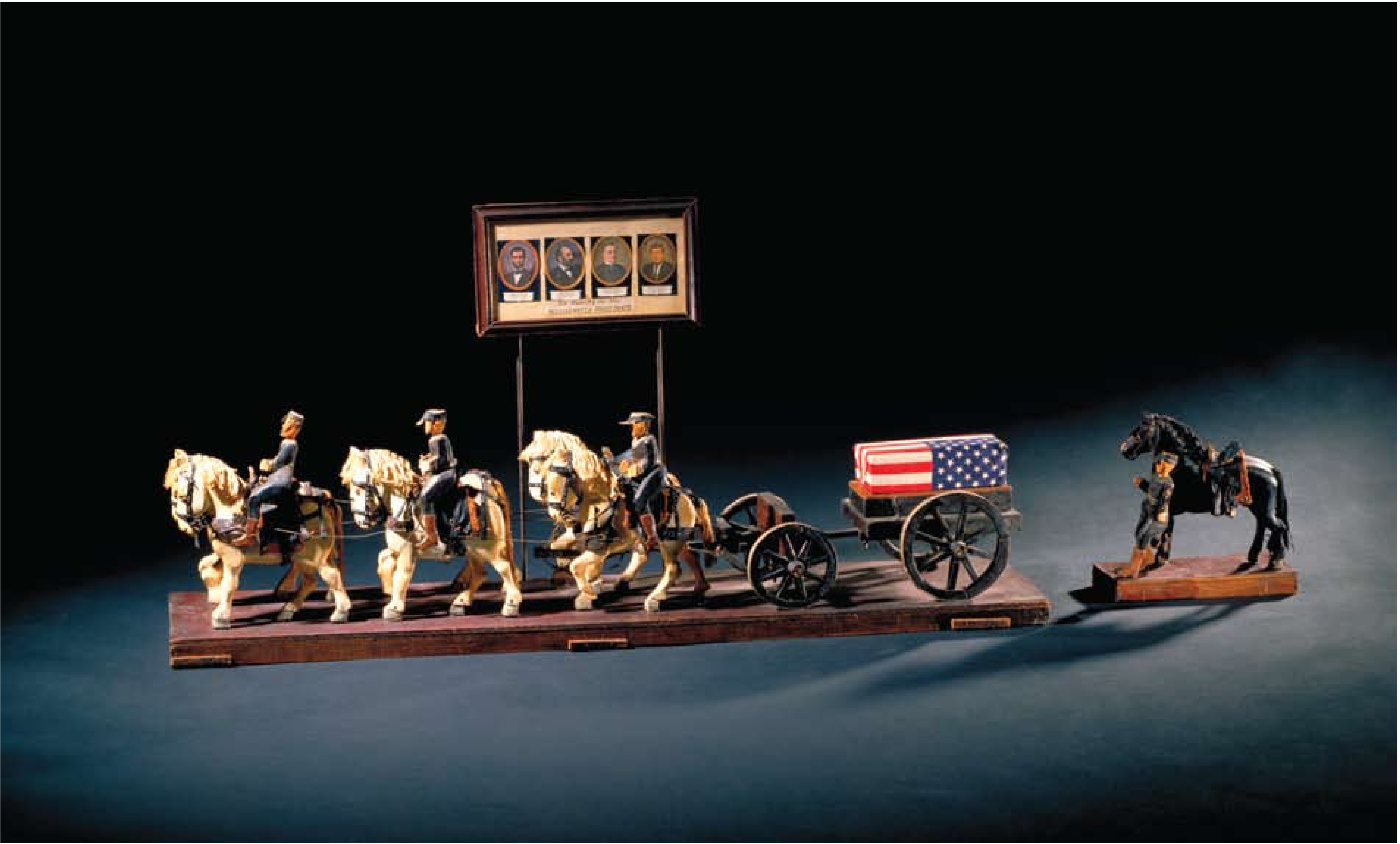
American artist Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008) aptly noted that "The artist's job is to be a witness to his time in history."[1] Artists today draw on a range of sources—newspapers, magazines, photographs, film, audio, and of course the Internet—to create artworks that serve as visual "texts" of a specific place and moment in time. Using artworks as sources and understanding how to decode them in the service of "drilling down" into difficult topics can create powerful learning experiences for all students.

So, how do you do it? How can you effectively use artworks in your classroom to teach your students both core historical thinking skills and content—especially about potentially difficult topics? We'll do this by examining a diverse group of artworks from the Smithsonian on one topic—the assassination of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy—as a case. Rather than providing complete lesson plans in this article, I'll describe suggested activities in general terms. Activities can be grouped to form a unit or can be selected individually to be used for a particular topic.

The mass-media coverage of the assassination of President Kennedy on November 22, 1963, in Dallas, Texas, reached an unparalleled number of people and made this historic event even more immediate. Since Kennedy's assassination exerted such a strong hold over the American public's imagination during the 1960s, and evoked tremendous emotion, it isn't surprising that many artists presented their own commentaries and interpretations—albeit from a variety of perspectives as well as media. For example, self-taught artist Marshall B. Fleming (1916–1998) created *Kennedy Caisson*, currently on view on the 3rd floor in the Smithsonian American Art Museum's Luce Foundation Center.[2] This multi-part carved and painted wood sculpture, created some time between 1964 and 1990, commemorates the assassination from Fleming's point of view and might generate a lot of classroom discussion. Students first need to see what is visually evident in the artwork before making suppositions about its meaning. You may want to begin a lesson by engaging students in close looking at either a color reproduction or projected digital image of *Kennedy Caisson* and by using one of the 'Learning to Look' worksheets from the Museum.[3] After identifying their own assumptions and perspectives, students can then research the artist and artwork on the Museum's website to discuss answers to questions similar to those you would use in the classroom for textual documents, such as: Who created this? Why? What material is it made out of? In what context was it produced?

An exhibition label, available online, reveals that Fleming wrote in a letter to a museum curator on October 1, 1989, "I have always admired President Kennedy. Upon seeing the funeral procession [on television] I thought I would like to make the caisson."[4] Students can look at photographs of the actual event and compare and contrast it with the placement of the animals, figures, and casket in this sculpture that depicts six white horses (three of which are ridden by uniformed soldiers) pulling a wagon with Kennedy's flag-draped casket. This is followed by a single black horse, which is walked by another soldier.[5] Although the sculpture has somber associations, it was meant to celebrate Kennedy's life and the lives of those who had died in office before him. Fleming's tribute to the other presidents who were assassinated—Abraham Lincoln, James A. Garfield, and William McKinley—is visible in the framed signboard that is in back of the horse nearest to the casket. The signboard—a traditional feature of a state funeral—is hand-lettered and reads "In Memory of the Assassinated Presidents."

Metalsmith/jeweler J. Fred Woell (b. 1934) feels that expressing ideas about political and social issues through his artwork is one way for him to make a difference as an American. "Some march in parades, some get involved in movements. I can say a lot about things in my work, and when they get exhibited, they probably have some effect on others," he said.[6] His *November 22, 1963 12:30 p.m.*, also in the Smithsonian American Art Museum collection, can serve as another visual reference point for students' historical studies about Kennedy's assassination.[7] In fact, the artwork's title refers to the precise day and time of the assassination. Like *Kennedy Caisson*, the artwork invites close



Marshall B. Fleming, *Kennedy Caisson*, ca. 1964–1990, carved and painted wood, leather, wire, metal, printed paper, paperboard, cloth, pen, and pencil, overall: 20 $^{1}/_{8}$ × 54 $^{1}/_{2}$ × 15 in., Smithsonian American Art Museum

above: J. Fred Woell, *Requiem*, ca. 1968 , silver, bronze, glass, photo and wood, $4\,^{3}/_{4} \times 4\,^{5}/_{8} \times {}^{3}/_{4}$ in., Smithsonian American Art Museum

left: J. Fred Woell, *November 22, 1963 12:30 p.m.*, 1967, copper, silver, brass, gold leaf, photo and wood, $6\,^{1}/_{4} \times 5 \times {}^{7}/_{8}$ in. , Smithsonian American Art Museum

observation and analysis. Students may want to use the Museum's Visual Literacy Graphic Organizer to connect their first impressions, which are often emotional and personal, with their knowledge of historical details of the time period.[8]

The small piece (6-¼ × 5 in.) was created in 1967 as a personal ornament from a variety of materials including copper, silver, brass, gold leaf, photo, and wood. A dark wood frame surrounds the entire piece. A gilt rectangle ornamented only by a rosette in each of its four corners serves as an inner frame. In its center is another frame; this time it's an irregular geometric shape made of metal. A circular opening in its center is surrounded by delicate metal beadwork that further frames a photograph of Kennedy's smiling face behind cracked glass. This is topped with a single star held in place with two tiny brackets. A bullet shell hangs as a pendant from a delicate filigree design at the bottom.

November 22, 1963 12:30 p.m. is an excellent example of visual juxtaposition.Woell placed two or more objects side by side as a way to communicate new ideas and to suggest relationships between disparate things. His unusual combination of found objects, like the broken glass and bullet shell combined with finely worked precious metals, may elicit curiosity and may stimulate critical thinking about the topic. It can be empowering for students to realize that artworks provide no "right" answer and that students can develop their own interpretations. This in turn can free them up to "develop their own analyses and opinions about the meanings of the past and the present and to support their ability to communicate, believe in, and defend their ideas."[9] So what questions do your students have about this artwork?

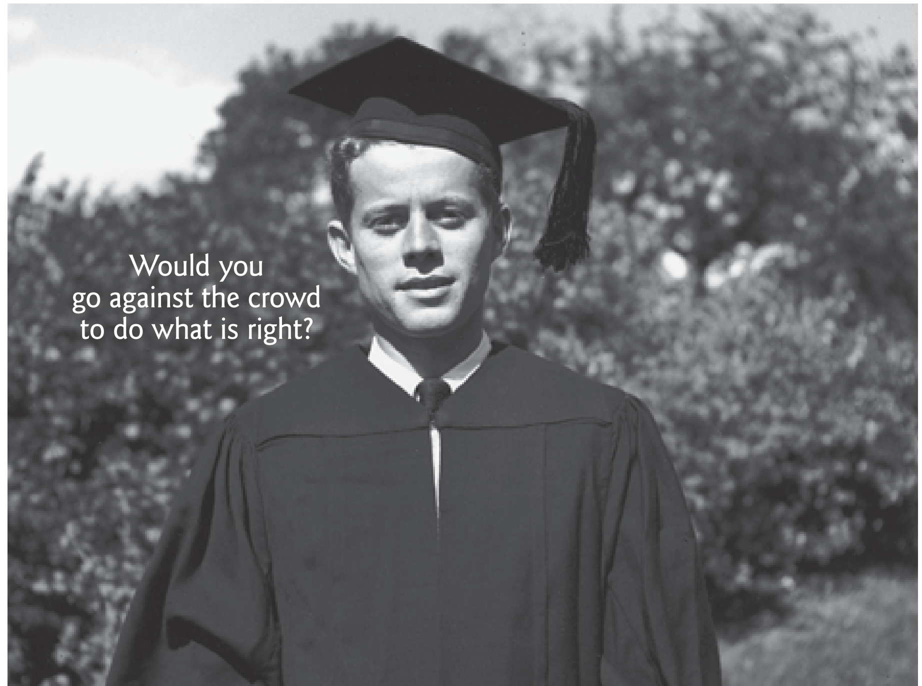
An interesting comparison to *November 22, 1963 12:30 p.m.* is another Woell artwork on a related theme, also in the Smithsonian American Art Museum collection. *Requiem*, created one year later (circa 1968), is a small ($4\text{-}^{3}/_{4} \times 4\text{-}^{5}/_{8}$ in.) artwork made from a variety of materials including silver, bronze, photograph, and wood.[10] A requiem is a Mass celebrated for the repose of the souls of the dead, and this work commemorates the assassination of President Kennedy's brother, Senator Robert Kennedy, in Los Angeles on June 5, 1968. A silver frame, stamped with the words "Jesus Saves" and accented by a single star on each of its four sides, encircles an image of Robert Kennedy's distorted face. This disturbing photographic portrait expresses perhaps both Kennedy's physical pain and the emotional pain endured by the nation as a result of this tragic event. The Kennedy family's Catholic faith is alluded to by the reference to Christ. In both artworks, the star represents Texas—the Lone Star State—the location of John F. Kennedy's assassination. Students can examine each work individually and then together to chart similarities and differences in style, materials, and visual elements on a Venn diagram. After careful analysis, they can then discuss their interpretations of the two artworks and relate them to the actual historical event.

Reclining Man (John F. Kennedy) is a small oil painting by Willem de Kooning (1904-1997) in the collection of the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden.[11] One needs to carefully study this abstracted

image to see the body of a reclining man appearing to hover within a backdrop of swirling, freely painted brushwork. The man's face, although sketchy, bears a striking resemblance to President Kennedy. Although today the artwork's title provides a clue to the subject, this wasn't always the case. Because the male gender and reclining pose of the figure were unusual in de Kooning's work, the subject of the painting had not been thoroughly examined until the late 1990s. Students can use reproductions of some of the same primary source materials employed by art historian Judith Zilczer to uncover the mystery.[12] For example, drawings by the artist, diaries from his friends, and photographs taken in the artist's studio from this period suggest that de Kooning painted the work soon after watching the assassination on television. Also, his estranged wife, painter Elaine de Kooning, had been working for over a year on a commissioned portrait of the president for the Truman Library and her sketches of Kennedy drawn from life filled her studio.[13] Students can also use *Reclining Man* as a departure point to discuss the various ways artists of the period were influenced by or used mass media images in their work. For example, aside from the silent, color motion picture Abraham Zapruder shot with a home-movie camera of Kennedy's motorcade as it passed through Dealey Plaza (thereby unexpectedly capturing the president's assassination), no photographs of the slain president were made public. Therefore, de Kooning's work is an imaginative rendering based on his memories of the president's features and news photographs of Kennedy during his life.

Every artist mentioned thus far brings a different lens to the study of this particular historical event, but Andy Warhol (1917–1963) is perhaps best known because of his prominent use of media-inspired images of daily life. He "borrowed" words or images from one context, such as a newspaper, and used them in another context, such as a painting, to create a wholly new image and meaning. Warhol also made recognizable images larger and often repeated the same image multiple times. In doing so, Warhol encouraged viewers to step back and critically examine and reassess the images they saw everyday on television, billboards, newspapers, and magazines. *Flash-November 22, 1963*, in the collection of the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery, exemplifies these concepts.[14] *Flash-November 22, 1963* is a portfolio of 11 screenprints depicting images of President Kennedy's face interspersed with those of the Schoolbook Depository Building, first lady Jacqueline Kennedy smiling in the presidential motorcade, the presidential seal, and more.[15] Eleven accompanying prints consist of reporter Philip Greer's wire bulletins concerning the events of that day and the three that followed. By deliberately placing text and visual images together, Warhol is inviting the viewer to connect the two. What one finds is that he created an artwork that compiles press bulletins and photographs from the assassination in order to chronicle the event as it unfolded.

Students can discuss how Warhol tells



John F. Kennedy Profile in Courage Essay Contest

- **Address national Social Studies standards**
- **Access lessons plans and curriculum resources**
- **Winner and nominating teacher will be honored by Caroline Kennedy at the Profile in Courage Award Ceremony in Boston**

All U.S. high school students are invited to write an original essay describing an act of political courage by a U.S. elected official who served during or after 1956. Deadline for submission is January 7, 2012.

JOHN F. KENNEDY
LIBRARY FOUNDATION

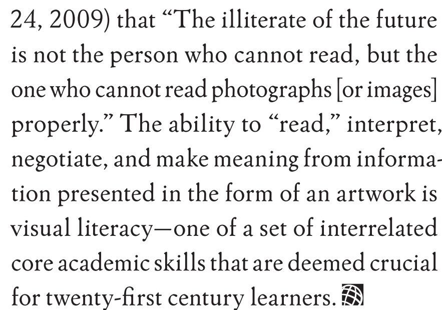
With support from John Hancock the future is yours 150 years of Promises Kept

For contest information, visit www.jfklibrary.org

this story by comparing the portfolio images with actual archival documents. Students can also study *Flash-November 22, 1963* and Woell's *November 22, 1963 12:30 p.m.* in comparison, as both artworks share the date of President Kennedy's assassination in their titles. Students can carefully examine these two artworks and then record the similarities and differences that are visually evident. They can also read Warhol's recollections of the assassination and analyze how his interpretation of the event as reflected in the artwork may be similar to or different than Woell's, based on the artist's writings. Warhol recalled his impression of the day:

> I heard the news over the radio when I was painting in my studio. I don't think I missed a stroke. I wanted to know what was going on out there, but that was the extent of my reaction…I'd been thrilled having Kennedy as president; he was handsome, young, and smart—but it didn't bother me that much that he was dead. What bothered me was the way the television and radio were programming everybody to feel so sad. It seemed like no matter how hard you tried, you couldn't get away from the thing.[16]

As we have seen, artists grapple with important historical questions in their work. As visual documents created at a specific place and moment in time, artworks have the potential to illuminate society's ideas about a particular historical event or era. They can provide students with another lens through which to master historical content and to practice historical thinking skills. Whether used by themselves or with other sources such as textual documents, artworks are another media through which to analyze the past. As history educator Samuel Wineburg advocates, going beyond fact-based historical instruction that relies on memorization, to teach students how to actually read and think is crucial if we are to prepare the next generation to be active participants in our democratic society. I think artist Thomas Ruff (b. 1958) might agree. The artist recalled in an interview in *Foto8* (October 24, 2009) that "The illiterate of the future is not the person who cannot read, but the one who cannot read photographs [or images] properly." The ability to "read," interpret, negotiate, and make meaning from information presented in the form of an artwork is visual literacy—one of a set of interrelated core academic skills that are deemed crucial for twenty-first century learners.



Notes

1. For the quote, see an article in *Interview* magazine available at www.interviewmagazine.com/art/robert-rauschenberg-/
2. Find this artwork here http://americanart.si.edu/images/1986/1986.65.305A-D_1a.jpg
3. The "Integrating Social Studies and the Visual Arts – Sample 'Learning to Look' Strategies" lesson is available from the Smithsonian American Art Museum and can be found here http://americanart.si.edu/education/pdf/learning_to_look.pdf.
4. Use the Smithsonian American Art Museum website to search for artworks such as this one found at http://americanart.si.edu/collections/search/artwork/?id=33957
5. According to Museum records, the artist may have based his overall design on a postcard of the funeral procession rather than a photograph.
6. As quoted in Donna Gold, "The Unpredictable Precisions of J. Fred Woell," *Metalsmith* 19, no. 1 (Winter 1999): 7.
7. Find this artwork here http://americanart.si.edu/images/1991/1991.57.1_1a.jpg
8. For a copy of the worksheet to use in your classroom, print one from the Smithsonian American Art Museum website at www.americanart.si.edu/education/pdf/seeing_art_in_a_historical_context.pdf.
9. Dipti Desai, Jessica Hamlin, and Rachel Mattson, *History as Art, Art as History: Contemporary Art and Social Studies Education* (New York and London: Routledge, 2010), 6.
10. Find this artwork here http://americanart.si.edu/images/1991/1991.57.2_1a.jpg
11. For additional information about this artwork see the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden's website at http://hirshhorn.si.edu/visit/collection_object.asp?key=32&subkey=5865; find this artwork here http://hirshhorn.si.edu/dynamic/collection_images/full/66.1207.jpg
12. Diary entries, photographs, and other sources can be found in Judith Zilczer, "Identifying Willem de Kooning's Reclining Man," *American Art* (Summer 1998): 27-35.
13. Elaine de Kooning had seven informal sessions in Palm Beach, Florida, with Kennedy at the end of December 1962 and early January 1963. Over the next ten months, she created hundreds of drawings and 23 paintings of him. For more information see *NPG In Your Classroom 5*, no. 1 (Spring 2011) available at www.npg.si.edu/docs/classroom12.pdf.
14. Find this artwork by searching "John Fitzgerald Kennedy" under Sitter Name in the CAP Portrait Search here http://npgportraits.si.edu/emuseumCAP/code/emuseum.asp
15. View the complete portfolio on the National Gallery of Art website here www.nga.gov/exhibitions/2011/warhol/flash.shtm.
16. As quoted in Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, *PoPism: The Warhol '60s* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 60. For teaching resources and other related artworks by Andy Warhol see The Andy Warhol Museum's website at www.warhol.org/.

Elizabeth K. Eder, Ph.D. *is Assistant Chair, National Education Partnerships, Smithsonian American Art Museum. She contributes a co-authored annual article for the May/June issue of* Social Education *that pairs an artwork from the Museum with a document from the National Archives.*

Related Artworks

There are several other contemporary artworks in the Smithsonian collections that relate to this subject. For example see Hans Hofmann (1880–1966), *To J.F.K.: A Thousand Roots Did Die with Thee*, an abstract oil painting on canvas from 1963 from the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden (see http://hirshhorn.si.edu/visit/collection_object.asp?key=32&subkey= 8336) and Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008), *Signs*, a color screenprint from 1970 that captures events from the 1960s, from the National Portrait Gallery (search for the artwork here http://npgportraits.si.edu/eMuseumNPG/code/emuseum.asp?page=search_basic&profile=cap). There are two additional pieces that would spark students' curiosity. Spencer Finch's (b. 1962) *Trying to Remember the Color of Jackie Kennedy's Pillbox Hat*, is a series of 100, 11 × 9 in. pastel on paper drawings that were inspired in part by the range of recollections of John F. Kennedy's assassination recounted in the Warren Commission. Each work is a face-size oval drawn in a different shade of pink in an effort to remember the precise color of the hat the first lady wore on that November day. See www.spencerfinch.com/view/drawings/31. *The Eternal Frame* is a video piece created in 1975 by two San Francisco-based artist collectives: T.R. Uthco and Ant Farm. The work documents a reenactment of the assassination with artists taking on the roles of President Kennedy, Jacqueline Kennedy, and others with exacting verisimilitude. The piece comments on the pervasive media culture in America at the time and explores how the Kennedy assassination itself became a new type of media event. The video can be ordered for educational use from Electronic Arts Intermix at www.eai.org/orderingInfoFaq.htm.