

CRITIC'S PICK

PETER SANTINO

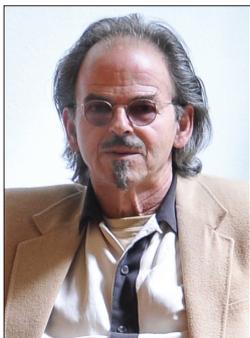


Peter Santino's sand piece *Apology*, installed at Halle 14 in Leipzig in 2009.

Some months ago, a formal invitation arrived announcing "The Exhibition at the End of Time, at the End of the World," opening at the Morris Graves Museum of Art in Eureka, California, on December 21, 2012—the day the Mayan calendar comes to a stop. Included were two signed and numbered certificates, issued by Failure Institute, worth 44 units apiece. They looked like paper money and each sported security holograms, infinity symbols, images of the museum's floor plan and facade, and the face of a man with a hypnotic gaze. The artist's name, Peter Santino, rang a bell. The announcement directed me to a website, santino.tv.

Born in Kansas in 1948, raised in Eureka, Santino had his first New York show in 1984, at Vox Populi, a gallery in the East Village founded by the late Colin de Land, who went on to open American Fine Arts in SoHo, which also represented Santino. In 1988, the artist submitted slides of a conceptual floor piece to a juried exhibition at a now-forgotten SoHo gallery. It was a sand painting featuring seemingly meaningless letters, which actually spelled the names of several critics, using only consonants (R B RT SM TH, for example). When his piece was selected, however, Santino opted out.

This never-exhibited work was the artist's first sand painting (he subsequently sold one, he says, to S.M.A.K., the contemporary art museum in Ghent for \$10,000) although he had shown other word pieces, in encaustic on Masonite and in gold leaf on marble. But it was when he saw Tibetan monks at the American Museum of Natural History in 1988 making sand mandalas and sweeping them away, that he turned to sand, inscribing the names of artists, museums, and even Supreme Court justices. In *My Father's Flag*, a 16-by-66-foot work, shown at American Fine Arts in 1990, he listed everyone who had influenced him since 1968. Then he vanished from the New York art world.



Peter Santino.

By 1991 he had stopped making objects, founded Failure Institute, and moved to Italy. He never ceased creating temporary works in the landscape, including series of small hollow spheres in cement, sand, marble dust, or terra-cotta, which he described as "failed paintings that had collapsed into themselves." In 1993 he moved back to Eureka and began issuing "failure statements," which culminated in the year 2000, when the institute took "credit (or blame) for the entire Y2K problem."

The upcoming December show, which runs until January 20, 2013—assuming there is a 2013—will feature preliminary drawings, such as *The End of History*, with 33 artists' names inscribed on a dropped ceiling; *The End of Time*, a figure-eight racetrack with two little cars named Truth and Beauty driving in an infinite loop; and *The End of the World*, a shag rug patterned with numbers. Thus, in claiming failure, Santino takes responsibility for the possible end of the world, luring people to a location once said to be the safest in the country. His digital countdown continues in real time. And whether the world does or doesn't end, Santino's project is doomed to failure. This should guarantee its success. —Kim Levin

Kim Levin is an independent art critic and curator.