

# At the Right Place: The Films of Stan Douglas in the Museum

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Stan Douglas, like so many artists who work with moving images in the exhibition space, is occasionally confronted with the allegation that his works would be better placed in a cinema than in a museum. Such voices instruct us that cinemas and museums apparently still remain fiercely guarded domains, whose sentinels will not tolerate transgression: anything necessitating darkness and motion is to be banned to the cinema, anything with a capacity for movement is to be immobilized in the museum. These are conceivably the voices of a dented ego that cannot bear anything which threatens to elude the grasp of its vision: whether because the museum seating is so uncomfortable and there are no regular starting times—thus making one always too early *and* too late—or because one would here prefer to see an object that, like a corpse, can be inspected unhurriedly in broad daylight, if only to ensure that it is no longer stirring. Douglas's film and video installations thwart the respective cinema and museum ideologies in equal measure, with Douglas removing from the one something to be painfully reclaimed and adding to the other something which is not always welcome.

The production content of the museum offers various guarantees for certain viewer attitudes and expectations, including the assumption that the perception of static objects can be enduringly secured without the factors of time and change interfering with the viewing. After all, the charge of and the "technology of the museum"<sup>1)</sup> are to ensure that historical objects remain available for "repeated discussion and viewing."<sup>2)</sup> With its objects "preserved [by] experts and policy, guarded and controlled in their viewing,"<sup>3)</sup> the museum promises both a haven of contemplation—in the sense of a self-determined length of time dedicated to concentrating on a fixed object—and a place for attaining an overview: of the individual object as well as of the (historically construed) entirety. Douglas's works furnish neither that which may be fixed nor grasped, and even their apprehension of time and history is diametrically opposed to the ideologies of the museum, just as his narrative techniques overextend the space and time of cinema.

## Hybrid Spatial Surfaces

Douglas's work, indisputably operating on a multifaceted claviature of the filmic, is structurally designed for museum conditions or those of the exhibition space—if only because photography

1) The "technology of the museum" refers here to the narrative and spatial paradigms of exhibiting institutions (not only museums), developed in the course of the Modern Age, in relation to their historical constructions, but also in view of their spatial ideologies, meaning the way in which the act of viewing was organized.

2) Liselotte Hermes da Fonseca, "Disziplinierung der Gespenster. Grenzen der Anthropologie des Museums-Menschen," in Rosmarie Beier, ed., *Geschichtskultur in der zweiten Moderne* (Frankfurt am Main, 2000), p. 246.

3) Ibid.

constitutes such a considerable element of his work. Moreover, his film and video installations are not only time-specific but also to a large extent space-specific in structure. They are veritable, walk-in narrative spaces. This becomes most apparent in the film installation *Le Détroit*, where the viewer's silhouette is directly interrelated with image generation. As soon as the viewer steps into the projection beam from one of the two projectors—their images reciprocally superimposed onto a semitransparent projection screen—the respective shadow renders the image visible on the screen's reverse side. In *Hors-champs*, the screen is likewise projected from both sides, always depriving the viewer, who must circumscribe it, of the other narrative layer. In *Evening* and *Win, Place or Show*, the narrative is in turn spread across several screens.

4) Ibid.

The spaces in which Douglas's film and video installations take place are furthermore painstakingly prepared architectures, offering far more than just shelter from light and sound. Far from being mere black boxes, it is evident from their "basic design" and spatial surfaces that they were initially conceived as hybrid spaces. This basic design includes the walls—with the exception of the end wall painted black—conceptualized in light gray and the floor carpeted in a medium gray. The screen, constructed from wooden panels hung in front of the black wall, has edges beveled at forty-five degrees to counteract any appearance of depth. During projection, these spatial surfaces generate two spaces, one present and one absent: for the gray walls and gray floor render the room visible as capacity, while the space between the black end wall and its screen, mounted a significant distance from the wall, forfeits any physically perceptible presence. Since this elaborate screen construction also generates the illusion of a free-floating, immaterial screen, a threshold emerges, a barely perceptible point of transition from the real space of the viewer to the illusory space of the film or video. Unlike cinema space, which in its absolute darkness completely masks the presence of the viewers, Douglas welcomes their presence and genuine space, inherent simultaneously in the transition to that other world of fiction and projections. If the technology of the museum is defined in the interrelation of objects and viewers as two fixed points without them touching each other,<sup>4)</sup> then Douglas's hybrid transitional spaces can be said to destabilize this concept.

#### Viewer Time, Work Time, Exhibition Time

With *Win, Place or Show*, Douglas in 1998 created the first of those "recombinant narratives" whose structures he has since permuted in a range of different variations. Using both mechanical and digital systems, the image and sound fragments of a narrative are interlaced in such a way that it would, as is the case in *Win, Place or Show*, take approximately 20,000 hours for an image sequence to be repeated. The viewers, who enter and exit these installations at various points in the cycle, themselves become part of this recombining narration. With the permutations of *Suspiria*, during its premiere at Documenta 11, the context for which this work was produced, laying claim to an infinite time period, Douglas is very clearly making a point about the conditions prevailing in the exhibition business: including the calculated impossibility of ever witnessing the permutations in their entirety. In Kassel, *Suspiria* combined the live footage provided by a video surveillance camera set up in the corridors of the Hercules Oktagon with

scenes shot in advance. From midnight until eight o'clock in the morning, viewers could follow the successive permutations of this endlessly recombining narrative through a live television broadcast. The exchange of media formats not only posited the possibility of an all-encompassing view, but in doing so it pointedly demonstrated the failure of this ideology. Indwelling the narrative nocturnally was most notably one species: the largest population of bats in the state of Hesse.<sup>51</sup>

In the open temporal and spatial circumstances to which the “recombinant narratives” give rise, a scandal impends. Though we are at liberty to decide when to enter and exit a given installation, we cannot return to it safe in the knowledge that what we saw before will still remain. Nor will we be aware of anything conveyed to other viewers, and occasionally to no one, in the meantime. The promise implicit in the exhibition—that the dialectical relationship between viewing and perception will culminate in a verdict negotiated between the viewer, the exhibit, and its contexts—is left unhonored and is in fact suspended in favor of a permanent negotiation/inquiry regarding the balance of time, space, viewer, exhibit, subject, presence, and absence.

### Camouflage and Seduction

The intervention with which Douglas thwarts the representational requirements of the exhibition institution—by filling its spaces with other spaces, times, and placements—plays on its own attention economics in the manner of a seductively employed camouflage. The expansive, space-consuming presentation of his works is a—in every respect clearly organized—mis-*en-scène*. In the video installation *Nu•tka•*, the entrance, for example, has been designed on the projection side so that the entering viewer, positioned at the visual center, is always directly immersed in the middle of a quadraphonic sound system. Two interlaced, 360-degree pan shots rotate on the screen, scanning line by line the landscape of Nootka Sound in opposite directions. The viewer is thereby surrounded by two countercurrent narratives from four loudspeakers imparting the colonization history of this landscape. Despite the many rotations, the dominant planarity of the image gains depth only through its extension into the three-dimensional sound, lending the disembodied voices not only invisible volume but also a respective individual localization. Thus Douglas ensures that the viewer is positioned at the exact place where the separate visual and audial planes cross. *At*—and *as*—the intersection of a visible two-dimensional and audible three-dimensional space, the viewer is physically involved in the continuous variation between the landscape and the voices—drifting apart and harmonizing again—as well as between the placation and derangement aroused by this narrative revolving around repression, elemental anxiety, expropriation, and madness. The organization of the space folds into yet another structure of the work, for within the empty space of these two rotations, in which the viewer is placed, a central gap referring to an absence manifests: the absence of the indigenous population of Nootka Sound who literally do not enter the picture. Appearing in their stead is a viewer who, unsure of having been seduced or deluded, now occupies that same uncanny space, which the narrative techniques of the museum, with its promise of history cleansed by knowledge and fixation, preclude.

5) Philip Monk, *Stan Douglas*, ed. Friedrich Christian Flick Collection (Cologne, 2006), p. 163.

### Space and Re/presentation of History

Museums promise to not only secure the ancestral space of those things having gained entrance into their galleries but also to assign—on the basis of date, place of origin, substance, and prevailing tastes—both a place and value in a still chronologically defined paradigm of history.<sup>6)</sup> In nearly all of his works, Douglas proposes, in this homestead of ordered circumstances, an alternative paradigm of history—one that exhibits fault lines, mixes genres, and pits the idiosyncrasy of the cross-references against the “targeted precision” of the chronological and the “material testimony.”

The video installation *Win, Place or Show* exhibits this in a vertiginous interaction between reconstruction and invention, plot density and endless distension, media translation and historical fact. The “history” of this installation begins with a municipal master plan, which formed the basis for the nineteen-fifties redevelopment of Strathcona, a Vancouver suburb. The basic idea was to demolish the old structures and replace them with a working-class housing development with a modernist imprint. Yet in the end, only two of the planned complexes were ever built. Stan Douglas tells us a story that could not, in fact, have happened in this way, as it rests on a never-realized concept. Nonetheless, the work reconstructs an “authentic” urban planning project, representing a model of an architectural style, which at that time had been established worldwide in quite a realistic manner. Douglas is therefore dealing neither with a local history nor with any specific event but is instead exploring the still-fictional, yet concretely intended, plans on the basis of their representative status of modernism. He has a Type B1 worker’s apartment reproduced as a film set on a scale of 1:1 and then furnished in prototypical period style. From this model of replication ensues the spatial framework for the actions played out on this set. Donny and Bob, the scene’s two protagonists, correspond to the stereotypes created by a TV series produced in Vancouver in 1968. They represent the typical actor characterizing the working class of that time—but the fictionalized-through-media notion of this societal group.

Douglas’s translation of the aforementioned contexts to the level of space, time, and action interrelation is developed in respect to the recording technology from the underlying parameters: restrictive architecture, media representation, and stage.

The action, spanning from conspiracy theory discussions and horse race odds to culminate in a fight between the two protagonists, is shot from twelve different camera angles. The cameras are set up in such a way that they bisect the space along two parallel, shifted axes and simultaneously always encompass the space in its entirety. The camera positioning is set up to capture two contradictory visual offers: the plot intensification through folding of the space and the all-encompassing view of the stage or the film set. These principles are perpetuated in the exhibition space. The two adjacent projection surfaces—angled at seven degrees to the side and separated by a two-centimeter gap—create the optical effect that the viewer apparently has an “overview” of both screens at once. This visual offer of an all-encompassing view is permanently undermined by the fractures apparent within the displayed spatial fragments, overlappings, and croppings. The two protagonists appear occasionally at the image edge, other times disappear in the gap between screens, or emerge doubled or mirrored on both sides of the projections. The seemingly panoptical view eludes the viewer in the perpetuating spatial interweaving and

6) Even the idea of a universal history, often posited as an alternative paradigm, only modulates the chronological historical paradigm as respects formal comparisons, which in the end favor an equally restrictive paradigm of superficial analogies.

spatial folding as well as in the plot navigating therein. Thus the “totalitarian” spatial concept underlying *Win, Place or Show* in substance is transferred, not into the structure of a historical performance, but rather into a claustrophobic, fragmented, disastrously inexorable constant, within which the action abides by the dictates of the space.

The entanglement of fiction and replica, of mediality and paradigm, generates precisely that paradox/parody always inherent in the concept of master plans or other systems of order purporting totality. The museum, or rather the exhibition institution as the venue for this performance, is in equal measure the representative of Douglas’s implemented space and the authority for a concept differing from the historical conception proposed by Douglas.

### At the Right Place

The dawn of the Modern Age saw the emergence not only of a new type of museum but also new types of psychiatric institutions and prisons. Three different architectural and scenographic concepts were developed to permit the all-encompassing, panoptical view, and with it control over cultural knowledge, the uncanny other, and the socially suspect.<sup>7)</sup> Preserved, locked away, excluded, and examined within these walls was anything that might cling to modernism, whether as reference, menace, or failure. In his work, Douglas proposes a critically and historically reflective dialogue with the processes of modernism, especially those affecting its capacity for repression regarding everything and everyone with the power to derail the modern belief in progress. The spaces, media, and histories he implements in the museum, or institution, expand into an instance of modernity, administering knowledge, history, and anything else causing concern. They disconcert and overextend their re/presentative standards by effectuating unstable spatial relations, deferring through repetition, and eluding the all-encompassing view—and this not only because Douglas operates his works with moving images, but because these have neither beginning nor end. They provide hybrid housing for inhabitants whose spatial, temporal, and visual non-locatability does not accommodate the eternity-promising, knowledge-channeling discourse of the museum. The scandal of this intervention resides particularly in its denial of a safe, autonomous vantage point for the viewer and in the impossibility of forming a terminal, aesthetic opinion, owing to the works’ sheer elusiveness—of their narrative and temporal structure and of their tangible structural architecture. Just as Stan Douglas always provides detailed specifications relevant to the locations, contexts, literature, related film footage, and so on for each of his works, he also describes each work of art in its structural, technical components in minute detail, and these too culminate in a commitment which evokes difference and challenges a process of permanent self-critical thinking. In this respect, the museum affords considerable contingency, still retained as “past imperfect,” the indeed ideological—but for Stan Douglas’s oeuvre constitutive—structure of an obsolete concept of autonomy, whose promise of freedom he knows very well how to use.

7) There were of course prisons (dungeons) and madhouses long before this, however the architectures derived from the idea of the panopticon, explicitly designed as custodial buildings, did not emerge until the late eighteenth century.