

**Stan Douglas**  
Mise en scène



Edited by León Krempel

# Stan Douglas

## Mise en scène

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# Foreword

Stan Douglas has long been one of the most original conceptual thinkers on all matters pertaining to the relationship between cinematic forms and their various technological structures. To many people, Douglas is most familiar through his visually absorbing and sophisticated films and videos. His constant archaeology of the technical and conceptual feasibility within reproductive technologies, his innovative use of editing techniques, and his computer software codes have generated some of the most critically praised artistic works in contemporary art. In a stellar career marked by major transformations in the technical and visual supports of film and video, Douglas has been a relentless pioneer, helping us reimagine the historical specificities of time-based, projected works without falling into the solipsism of excessive technophilia. At the same time, as an artist of wide-ranging artistic vision and rigorous aesthetic standards, his works enable museum audiences to not only immerse themselves in complex visual events but also to grapple with complex questions of mediums and form, temporality and duration, cinematic time and haptic space, sonic and aural structures.

While Douglas's oeuvre in film and video has been justly celebrated, his work in photography, though little known, is no less accomplished. It is the intention of this exhibition to reframe the understanding of his practice by placing photography at the center of the analysis of his more than thirty-year career. From the very inception of his career as an artist, photography has played a fundamental role in his practice. Over this period he has produced photography as an entirely independent artistic pursuit, and he has also employed still photographic images to create works based on slide tapes and projections. *Stan Douglas - Mise en scène* is the first significant exhibition to be devoted to his

relationship to the medium. Rather than covering the entire scope of his career, the exhibition focuses on large-scale works (often conceived in "tableau format") produced between 2008 and 2014.

The exhibition features different series of photographic works that are conceptually linked. The occasion of the exhibition in Haus der Kunst will see the introduction of two new works: The first is a new video, *Luanda-Kinshasa* (2014), that is connected to the overall thematic framework of the photographs. The second, *Helen Lawrence* (2014), is Douglas's very first theater work, a live cinematic piece of theater. It will mark its European debut at Munich's Kammerspiele theater. In addition, Douglas has recently broken new ground with the app *Circa 1948*.

Nevertheless, photography will occupy the most prominent space within the exhibition. The images are chiefly concerned with narrating transitions in global histories, linking prewar reflections on social imaginaries to the postwar industry of documentary photography. Political themes bleed into cultural histories, such as the investigation of postcolonial liberation struggles and the re-enactment of countercultural disputes between urban subcultures and policing. This convergence of historical periods and social-political-cultural events from the first half to the last quarter of the twentieth century is reflective of how Douglas constantly attempts, in all his works, to complicate and undermine expectations of documentary accuracy. In these images photography mediates the reading of history, but it also generates reflections on how historical narratives are produced, and how the documentation of events shapes cultural memory. In the coruscating tracing of time, image, and history, Douglas's interjection of fiction or invented models of representation draws the viewer deeper into the language of cinematic postproduction.

For all these reasons and more, it has been a singular privilege to work with Stan Douglas to shape this exhibition. We are immensely grateful to him and to members of his studio, especially Linda Chinfen and Brodie Smith, for making the exhibition possible. In putting together this survey of Douglas's photographic work, the curators of the exhibition—León Krempel at Haus der Kunst, Séamus Kealy at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, and Jean-Marc Prévost, director of the Carré d'Art, Nîmes—have provided a careful and considerate examination of the artist's exemplary career. Lending further insight to the understanding of the work are the contributing essayists: David Campany, Diedrich Diederichsen, Catherine Soussloff, Chantal Pontbriand, Séamus Kealy, and León Krempel. We are thankful to them for their incisive texts. We also wish to acknowledge the excellent collaboration we have enjoyed with Katharina Haderer and Sandra Leitte at Prestel Verlag. The director of the Münchner Kammerspiele, Johan Simons, as well as members of his team, Alexandra Twarog and Ana Zirner, and the Kammerspiele's dramatic adviser, Jeroen Versteede, have all been important partners and collaborators in the production and staging of *Helen Lawrence*, Douglas's first foray into the world of theater.

Several supporters and institutional partners have been instrumental in making the exhibition possible. We would like to thank David Zwirner, Angela Choon, Anna Drozda, and Justine Durrett from the David Zwirner Gallery, New York and London, and Victoria Miro and Erin Manns from the Victoria Miro Gallery, London, for their support. The realization of the exhibition in Munich was generously supported by the David Zwirner Gallery, with additional support by the Victoria Miro Gallery. Lead support for the exhibition in Munich was provided by the Alexander Tutsek-Stiftung, with

further contributions by the Embassy of Canada in Berlin and Henning and Brigitte Freybe. We are grateful for all their generosity and contributions. The exhibition in Nîmes was supported by the Centre Culturel Canadien in Paris.

Many colleagues at all three museums have contributed to the success of this ambitious endeavor and have been instrumental to its realization. While we cannot name all of them, we would like to specifically mention Beatrice Paquereau and Delphine Verrières-Gaultier at Carré d'Art; Tina Köhler, Anton Köttl, and Ulrich Wilmes at Haus der Kunst; and Rachael Thomas and Sean Kissane at IMMA.

# Introduction

In the years after his retrospective in Stuttgart (2007),<sup>1</sup> Stan Douglas initially executed a series of photographic projects influenced by his experiences as a filmmaker. *Crowds and Riots* (2008) merges the use of extras in film-like sets with the possibilities of computer montage. The interrelated black-and-white series *Midcentury Studio* (2010–11) and *Malabar People* (2011) imitated the visual language and motifs of reportage and commissioned photography of the postwar period. *Disco Angola* (2012), on the other hand, can be construed as a kind of fictitious travel report. Less well known are Douglas's uninhabited *Interiors* (2009–10), which deal with the subject of documentary images.

In addition to these series there is now the pseudo-documentary video *Luanda-Kinshasa* (2013), which, after the cinematic double projection *Hors-champs* (1992), once again stages a retrospective performance by jazz musicians. Douglas breaks new ground with the play *Helen Lawrence* (2014)—surprising to cinema aficionados and theater people alike—and the mobile app *Circa 1948* (2014). His register seems more multifaceted than ever: photography and film, theater and music; and in the two works mentioned last, the spoken word and digital technology.

Douglas had already taken his native city and preferred place of work, Vancouver, as a subject in earlier works such as *Strathcona* (1998), *Win, Place, or Show* (1998), and *Every Building on 100 West Hastings* (2001), and in so doing also raised questions of urban planning and sociology. In *Crowds and Riots*, *Helen Lawrence*, and *Circa 1948*, and less obviously also in *Interiors*, *Midcentury Studio*, and *Malabar People*, parts of the city are explored from a historical perspective. What makes these so interesting is their being located at what was formerly the very edge of the British Empire, as well as along trade and migration

routes leading across the Pacific to Asia. *Disco Angola* and *Luanda-Kinshasa* focus on the 1970s. For the first time, these works take transatlantic triangles with the vertices of Angola, Congo, Portugal, and New York City as their primary interest.

Not only in the case of Vancouver, Douglas's works describe the appearance—characteristic to a specific place and time—of people who either remain fixed in their situation or find themselves in a state of change. Special attention is often given to a wide variety of objects that stand for individuals' or groups' strivings for social recognition and expanded power: fashionable *Shoes, 1947* (2010), for example. Dropped flowers lie upon the asphalt of *Abbott & Cordova, 7 August 1971* (2008). They bear witness to the peaceful sit-in with which the day began. None of the images address the dissemination of culturally specific forms of expression as explicitly as *Disco Angola*, which deals with the possibly West African roots of disco music, with kung fu and Capoeira, but also with such small distinguishing features as buttons and paisleys. In this context, the Angolans' struggle for freedom and the *Exodus* of the Portuguese almost recede into the background.

Three of the four images in *Crowds and Riots* refer to local protest rallies, which were in turn manifestations of global emancipation movements. Each of them depicts only a subsidiary location, but does so elaborately and with many precisely observable details. They recount nothing of the circumstances of the gatherings; even the titles, which designate the location and date, remain silent in this regard. One of the tableaux, *Hastings Park, 16 July 1955* (2008), the third in chronological order, lacks any historical content in the usual sense. It shows spectators at a horse race in Hastings Park. A woman with brown gloves appears worried, others enjoy the sunny day in a convivial atmosphere.



With the exception of the *Klatsassin Portraits* (2006), *Crowds and Riots* are the first examples of staged photography by Douglas. Straightaway he risks taking on a subject that is both difficult and rare, if it was ever recognized as a subject at all. Depictions of a crowd of people as agents of collective action are familiar from the history painting of the nineteenth century. Douglas probably looked more to historical reportage photography, which no longer laid claim to being art. Compared with such representations of autonomous or heteronomous crowds, his series signifies a tremendous advance coupled with a renunciation, namely a departure from the dubious representation of and contestable testimony to a seemingly accentuated critical circumstance and a return to the moments in which everything was still open, in which history had just been made somewhere or grasped as being in the making.

An inquiry comprising textual, visual, and factual evidence underlies many works by Douglas. As early as 1992, he reconstructed the inexplicable loss of a Japanese immigrant worker from police files for *Pursuit, Fear, Catastrophe: Ruskin, B.C.* Historians and criminologists work in a similar manner. Why search for causes at all? As soon as the historian knows what has happened, is it not also clear why what did happen had to happen? The what-why paradox is an aspect of the re-enactment theory of Robin George Collingwood, which perhaps makes it possible to grasp the aesthetic of Douglas's works from 2008 historic-philosophically.<sup>2</sup> It is clear in several places that these works encourage theory-driven reflection upon history. *Hastings Park*, for instance, makes use of the theme of emotions, which were examined in relationship to the idea of the state or commonwealth by Baruch Spinoza. Some years before the completion of *Crowds and Riots*, Spinoza's concept of the crowd (*multitudo*) had been reintroduced into political philosophy and popularized as "swarm intelligence."<sup>3</sup>

The series *Interiors*—completed in 2010 but only fully printed and given its title in 2013—once again takes up the subliminal theme of *Crowds and Riots*. In contrast to the man in the crowd, here is one who has at his disposal a multiplicity of objects and through time has created his own system for ordering them. The spaces—an artist's cabin, places for selling shoes, junk, groceries—appear overly full in the chosen segments, as if very little would be required to create disorder. The inhabitants or owners, who may have changed over time, remain unseen, as does the commanding authority behind the police deployments in *Crowds and Riots*. In contrast to many of the earlier works, these series no longer evoke the feeling of being at the mercy of depersonalized powers such as capital or chance. In *Journey into Fear* (2001), for example, the variously synchronized actors still

function like interchangeable parts in the gears of a machine. In the almost silent *Vidéo* (2007), a linear plot, such as the one in Kafka's *The Trial*, seems to end with the female protagonist's death, determined in advance by some mysterious and nameless power. Standing before *Crowds and Riots* and *Interiors*, in contrast, the viewer is more likely to have the impression that these are about individual people and their purposeful actions. Taken up as subject matter, intentions are thus yet again something that can be linked to the concept of history.<sup>4</sup>

And the viewer? Before 2008 there was only one decidedly interactive work by Douglas: in *Le Détroit* (1999), visitors to the installation cast their shadows onto the double-sided projection screen upon which positive and negative are projected, slightly staggered in time, making their bodies into spotlights. In *Helen Lawrence* it is the actors themselves who hold the camera. The viewer is placed in the position of viewing the piece simultaneously from various perspectives. *Circa 1948* transforms the user into a flying "reporter." Along the lines of Douglas's alias, the app encourages users to acquaint themselves with the everyday life of an era in the recent past from the first-person perspective. Among the photographs, it is above all the tableau of *Abbott and Cordova* that, through the multiplicity of its lines of sight, challenges the viewer to see through someone else's eyes, someone whom the viewer might have been.

1 Hans D. Christ and Iris Dressler, eds., *Stan Douglas: Past Imperfect—Works 1986–2007*, exh. cat. Staatsgalerie Stuttgart and Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart (Ostfildern, 2008).

2 Cf. William H. Dray, *History as Re-Enactment: R. G. Collingwood's Idea of History* (Oxford, 1995, reprint 2007), p. 45.

3 Cf. for example Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (London, 2004).

4 Cf. Doris Gerber, *Analytische Metaphysik der Geschichte. Handlungen, Geschichten und ihre Erklärung* (Frankfurt am Main, 2012).

# The Angel of History in the Age of the Internet

*Paris changes! but naught in my melancholy  
Has stirred! New palaces, scaffolding, blocks of stone,  
Old quarters, all become for me an allegory,  
And my dear memories are heavier than rocks.*

Charles Baudelaire, 1857<sup>1</sup>

In what turned out to be the last few years of his life, the German critic Walter Benjamin became deeply interested in the idea that moments in history do not remain permanently accessible to posterity. Rather, they lie dormant until a new circumstance makes them understandable and pertinent. "Every now ... is the now of a particular recognizability, in which things put on their true—surrealist—face," he wrote in his opus of notes published as *The Arcades Project*.<sup>2</sup> Suddenly and unexpectedly, a past moment may become meaningful to a present that has the means to grasp its deepest character.

The opportunities for this may be very brief and we ought to presume that more often than not they pass us by. But when they are seized, by a society or perhaps by an individual, something like a time tunnel appears to connect two moments, present and past. It's an illusion of course, because we can never really go back. What happens is better described as an *allegorizing* of the past by the present, or perhaps an allegorizing of the present by a past it now claims as its own.

Stan Douglas came of age as an artist in the 1980s, at a time of renewed interest in allegory as an artistic mode. The myths of pure presence and straight speaking that motivated so much modernist art were beginning to frustrate and to reveal their limitations. A "postmodern turn," as it was named in haste, signaled a range of reconnections between art and everyday life, between high art and popular culture, between the here and the far away, between artistic mediums, and perhaps most significantly between the present and the past.

At the center of this turn were photography and film, two mediums that, although having their own distinctive identity within high modernism, became attractive to artists of many kinds because they seemed to belong everywhere and nowhere in particular. Some critics, notably Craig Owens, went so far as to suggest that photography is *inescapably* allegorical: it operates at the intersection of numerous rhetorics, genres, and discourses, none of which belong to it exclusively. Moreover the photograph offers only a fragmentary account of a world it steals, quotes, and even substitutes itself for, with tenuous means of explanation.<sup>3</sup>

While this is true enough, what really opened up photography to the allegorical imagination had as much to do with the medium's cultural and historical standing in the closing decades of the twentieth century. Photography was no longer the defining medium of the age, as it had been in the previous era dominated by mass circulation magazines and newspapers. The displacement was long and drawn out. It began with the advent of cinema, was confirmed by the rise of television, and sealed by the arrival of

the Internet (all mediums in which Stan Douglas has taken an interest). Photography would now be a *secondary* medium. Not exactly obsolete, but certainly eclipsed. And in the eclipse other possibilities emerged: new ways of using and thinking about photography beyond the burden of authority given to it by news and advertising; new temporalities beyond the charged moment and its cultish power of immediacy; new philosophical questions; new conditions of knowledge and experience; new pictorial problems and new aesthetic realms.

In other words, photography had once been in a position to define the look and value of the age over which it ruled, but now it seemed its role might be to *revisit* that age, to rethink it, reflect upon it, and in the process perhaps even open up alternative ways of understanding the present. We might say then, that photography has undergone a shift, significant but not total, from Emissary of Progress to Angel of History. Here is Walter Benjamin again, in perhaps his most well-known lines:

This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.<sup>4</sup>

The allegorical photographer backs into the future. Perhaps his own images pile up before him. Perhaps he scavenges the greater pile produced by the culture around him. Perhaps the new archival technologies of his own moment—today it is the Internet—allow him to reach further down into the pile, further back into the past, to pick out fragments presumed lost or irrelevant. And perhaps with his findings he is prompted to make new images.

Photographs can only be made in the present, although they immediately convert that present into something past. But if the past is to enter into the photographer's frame it must do so either through the traces it has left behind in the world or through a re-imagining. Stan Douglas pursues both approaches. That is to say, he makes fairly "straight" documentary photographs of places where the past might be still discernible and thinkable, and he makes photographs that stage or restage moments from history. He explains:

The idea I come back to again and again is the habits of a culture or a people being disrupted by something and somehow having to deal with that. Do they deal with it by going back to the old ways, or do they deal with it by finding the new possibilities in this new situation? That's the key thing in almost every project.<sup>5</sup>

While that is a neat enough summary, Douglas leaves out the fact that such moments of disruption or transition are easier to see with hindsight. We must presume they are happening all around us, and it is a challenge to our political consciousness to address them. All of Douglas's projects seem to be triggered by encounters with the remnants of moments from history. They take as their subject or point of departure short-lived occasions from the twentieth century when something significant seemed to hang in the balance. It might be a moment of civic revolt. It might be a moment in the professional or artistic development of photography or film when new forms of expression were taking shape. It might be a moment in which a society paused momentarily to consider its future. It might be a turning point in which a constellation of chance factors produced something precarious and unpredictable. Douglas is unusually but consistently attuned to such moments. He may not be an Angel of History, but over the last three decades he has developed a dialectical means of bridging present and past that aspires to contemplate, through the rearview mirror, the forces of what Benjamin noted we prefer to call "progress."

It is often assumed that in the golden age of allegorical painting (Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) audiences were familiar with the stories, events, and morality tales being depicted. But this was far from always being the case. Very often a compelling depiction could prompt a reconnection. The allegorist revives something presumed dead. In this way their art becomes not an aesthetic end in itself but a starting point, an overture to curious learning.

Douglas is well aware of this activating dimension of allegory. His photographs may point to historical forces, but they do not, cannot, explain anything like their full complexity. Each project begins with an interest in a dense nexus of facts and anecdotes about a past moment. This nexus informs and structures the making of a work that in the end cannot really convey the richness of its motivation. To a greater or lesser extent that task is carried out by catalogue essays, gallery press releases, interviews, and artists' statements which orbit around Douglas's work as *para-texts*—bits and pieces of information which are not strictly part of the art but which ground it and open it up.<sup>6</sup> In this sense

Douglas is an exemplary post-conceptual artist, drawing on the now well-oiled relay between the space of the gallery and the space of the art magazine, art book, history book, or Internet search engine. So before I continue, I should outline the general terms of this *modus operandi*.

Let's take as an example Douglas's photograph *Abbott & Cordova, 7 August 1971* (made in 2008), a highly artificial-looking image of what might be a clash between police and citizens in a late twentieth-century modern city. Turning to the press release issued by Douglas's gallery, David Zwirner, we learn that: "Douglas stages a scene from the famous Gastown Riots, which exploded mounting tensions between local hippies and law enforcement. Striving for historical accuracy, the work replicates local businesses, as well as music posters and newspapers from the time." This gives viewers some context for the work—and perhaps even some tips as to what to look at and "appreciate" in the richness of the image. The numerous monographs that reproduce *Abbott & Cordova, 7 August 1971* pass on some of Douglas's research, set the scene for the historical moment that is being reimagined, and elaborate the process required to bring about that reimagining. Alternatively, even a quick Internet search for "Gastown Riots" will plunge you into a rich world of archival material, perhaps of the kind Douglas was looking at in the first place. Quite rightly Douglas heads off the accusation that his art demands such in-depth knowledge:

People always say: "How can we possibly be expected to know all that?" I don't expect you to know all that. I do not want the work to simply have a message that is recognizable immediately. What I hope the work can deliver is that it will offer more, the more you spend time with it. As you ask it more questions it will give you more answers.<sup>7</sup>

These days, of course, it could hardly be easier to get any number of "answers" at the click of a mouse or even a quick browse through a shop at an art museum. The pile accumulating before us is enormous and more available than ever. Accessing and assembling a sense of a moment from the last century is no longer a specialized professional activity. Artists, viewers, and readers—we are all historical researchers. All Angels of History. Potentially.

*Abbott & Cordova, 7 August 1971* is one of four works comprising Douglas's loose series *Crowds and Riots*. Each image pictures a moment in the history of his hometown of Vancouver, Canada. *Powell Street Grounds, 28 January 1912* reimagines a moment from the free speech fight of that date, which broke

out in response to a bylaw banning outdoor meetings of the Industrial Workers of the World. After negotiations, free speech was permitted in parks but not on street corners. *Ballantyne Pier, 18 June 1935* revisits the Vancouver dockworkers' strike, which although a failure did eventually pave the way for the unionizing of dockworkers in British Columbia. *Hastings Park, 16 July 1955* shows a crowd waiting for a horse race to start. Each tableau is elaborately and conspicuously staged, and very different in appearance from the historical documents that informed Douglas's research. Indeed, so arch and prepossessing is Douglas's mise-en-scène, and so manicured are the color palettes, that each looks like a still from one of Hollywood's recent attempts to make a "quality" historical movie. Except that Hollywood probably wouldn't touch these subjects, and Douglas isn't actually making movies here. The stillness and pictorial artifice serve to *signal* the past rather than summon it forth as authoritative spectacle. For all the period detail on display, there's little suggestion that "this is how it was."

These photographs may alert us to particular moments in history, but they also invite a more generalized and contemplative set of questions to do with the status of reenactment in today's visual culture, in which so much of the past seems accessible and genre hybrids like "drama-documentary" and "advertorials" are ubiquitous. As Bill Nichols has noted, reenactments do not offer historical evidence. Rather they "contribute a vivification of that for which they stand. They make what it feels like to occupy a certain situation, to perform a certain action, to adopt a particular perspective visible and more vivid. Vivification is neither evidence nor explanation. It is, though, a form of interpretation, an inflection that resurrects the past to reanimate it with the force of desire."<sup>8</sup>

We should expect "forces of desire" to be capricious and illogical. This becomes apparent in *Midcentury Studio*. For this extended suite Douglas takes his cue from North American press photography in the years following World War II. Catalogues and press releases will tell you that after Douglas familiarized himself with the extant work of Raymond Munro—an ex-military pilot who became a press photographer in Vancouver in 1949—the artist visited the extensive archives of the Black Star press photo agency.<sup>9</sup> He then set about recreating the look, subjects, and milieu of that moment. In the late 1940s many press photographers were still working with the handheld 4x5 Speed Graphic, a clunky and awkward sheet film camera that in anything less than expert hands produced clunky and awkward pictures (although very rich in detail from that large negative size, especially when lit by a flashbulb that allowed for small apertures

and great depth of field). The resulting prints were rarely seen directly by the public: they would be cropped down to key details before reproduction in the crude halftone of newsprint. The Black Star Collection is in the care of the Ryerson Image Centre in Toronto, but dozens of similar archives accumulated by North American newspapers over decades are currently being destroyed or sold off piecemeal. They are simply not needed. When they go, they take with them an extraordinarily rich anecdotal history. *Midcentury Studio* imagines an untrained photographer like Munro who learns on the job in a culture moving swiftly but unevenly from wartime austerity and pragmatism to the wasteful and selfish aspirations of 1950s consumerism. To this end, Douglas's project includes Weegee-esque crime scenes and shots of raids on gambling dens alongside pictures that might have illustrated local stories about magicians and sportsmen, glamorous people and common citizens as they settled into post-war lives.

On one level, the whole time-consuming, labor-consuming, and money-consuming enterprise undertaken by Douglas (and his skilled team) is quite gratuitous here. Where *Crowds and Riots* forged an aesthetic distinct from its historical source material, *Midcentury Studio* mimics its sources pretty closely. Republishing or exhibiting those original press photos might have been just as effective.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, a comprehensive book about *Midcentury Studio* includes archival photographs from the 1940s and '50s that are every bit as compelling as Douglas's versions.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, a quick look on eBay throws up similar gems of mid-century press photography at \$10 or \$15 apiece. Lavishing great artistic attention on the detailed re-creation of a world according to its own representational logic may well seem excessive, but Douglas is not setting out to "copy the masters" here. His "force of desire" leads him to copy a tellingly gauche kind of photographic practice. Not high art but popular local news. And it is precisely this disproportionate amount of effort—the spectacle of labor on display in *Midcentury Studio*—that becomes the source of fascination and the unlikely entry point into the historical moment.

For *Disco Angola* (2012), Douglas once again conjures up the persona of a photographer, but with very different aims and outcomes. This time the results take the form of a hypothesis. What if a photojournalist involved in New York's burgeoning underground disco scene around 1974 was also traveling to Angola, where a coup d'état had just ended Portuguese rule? Two concurrent but very different moments of "liberation"—one sexual, one national—linked by an imaginary photographer and by the African rhythms to be found in early disco. Within

a couple of years disco went mainstream and lost its edge, while Angola was destabilized and plunged into twenty-eight years of civil war. Beyond the particular nuances suggested by the photographs, *Disco Angola* reflects something of the turn in recent historical consciousness toward looking not so much back and forth through time as across it, connecting events that were happening simultaneously.<sup>12</sup> In a world economy with its uneven flows of goods, labor, art, and information, an understanding of simultaneity becomes a matter of great urgency. History cannot be grasped or told without this complex transnational braiding of politics, power, and culture. Old habits of linear history-telling must give way to analyses in parallel.

Douglas's loose series *Interiors*, which includes *Artist's Cabin* (2009), *Olde Curio Shop*, *Kardynal Shoes*, and *Tosi Foods* (all 2010), shows different aspects of the persistence of older ways of doing things (making art, reusing past objects, buying shoes and food from independent stores). These are more or less documentary pictures that also point to the inevitably uneven development and take-up of "progress." Douglas has been making photographs in this idiom for some time. He's interested in places which, when photographed, have the potential to strike us as stage sets that dramatize their own historical determinations. Recently in Cuba he photographed architecture that has been repurposed after a revolution that was never completed: a cinema now used as a parking lot, a church used as a bank or music hall, a convent used as a school, a cinema turned into a woodworking workshop.

A point of reference here might be Eugène Atget, the photographer who documented those parts of old Paris that were either endangered or ignored by modernity: buildings, interiors, streets, and tradespeople whose very existence testified to a living history of ruptures, shocks, shadows, and vestiges. Even Atget's bulky camera, glass negatives, and patchy prints were anachronistic, remaining unchanged throughout his decades of activity. Atget's sober stare and affection for everyday life saw him heralded as a precursor of modernist photography.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, his ability to stage space as an uncanny scene of the generalized crime that is capitalism endeared him to surrealists and those attuned to what History suppresses. Walter Benjamin and the photographer Walker Evans were early admirers.

Stan Douglas's movement between simple documentation and elaborate reconstruction can be taken as a reminder of one of the most humbling and subversive qualities of photography: there is no correspondence between cost of production and artistic merit. A photographer may slave for a year over an image with technicians and budgets at his disposal and be no more or

less successful than one who simply goes out to the street and takes a photograph in a matter of seconds. The intelligence and acuity of photography lie in experience and perception. Moreover, Douglas's interest not just in the past but in photography from the past could well be taken as a conditional acceptance that what is most significant about the medium has little to do with art and a lot to do with its complex status as a source of documents. If we take Douglas at his word, that he is interested in providing prompts to search for "answers," his is an art that leads us away from art and into other things. Documents, above all.

And yet there is a sense in which we should see even staged photographs as documents—that is to say, as records of their own making. This is why the filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard insisted that even fiction films are documents of historically specific performances and should be approached as such. If photographs and films outlive the immediate moment of their making, they are likely to survive to posterity on the basis of their documentary character. Even "art photographs." *Disco Angola*, *Midcentury Studio*, and *Crowds and Riots* will turn out to be as much documents of Stan Douglas's moment, our moment, as any moment they depict. But in an age that is now so paralyzed in its thinking about the future, and so fascinated and overwhelmed by its apparent access to the past, what exactly is *our moment*?

Inevitably, allegories are fragile. Like jokes or satire or political broadsides, the more localized they are, the more acutely effective they are. Context is paramount but also unstable. Allegory is the enemy of the Universal. In this sense, allegorical artists are very much artists of their own place and time, however complicated that may be. This is so regardless of their interest in other places and times. For this reason, Douglas's most focused artistic gesture may well be the permanent display of *Abbott & Cordova, 7 August 1971* in a public space in Vancouver close to the site the image depicts.<sup>14</sup> Here at least the picture is "for" the people who are the most direct inheritors of that moment in 1971. Their response will be richest, although we can have our response too. For all the investment in photography as a medium of historical record, the presence of photographs in public places is rarely this permanent. While photographs thicken public space, usually as advertising, they come and go to the tempo and turnover of capital.

Nevertheless, it is often argued that photography supplanted the role once held in public consciousness by monuments, those public markers in stone or bronze of civic memory. But a photograph—of war, or unfreedom, or occasionally of

gallantry—becomes monumental in its repeated *dispersal*. Rarely does a photograph occupy the kinds of physical public space we associate with monuments. That is to say, there is usually little overt connection between the place depicted in the image and the place of its consumption.

Photography has become whatever it is precisely through its overturning of the very idea of site-specificity. Moreover, against the claim that a photograph is a historical record, many of the medium's most outspoken critics (from Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer, to Guy Debord, Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes, and Jean Baudrillard) have argued that we need to be on guard against the simple equation of photography with memory. Photography may even be the enemy of memory. Just because a photograph is a document it does not follow that its meanings are clear. Far from it. Meaning requires what Stan Douglas calls the "search for answers."

- 1 *Paris change! mais rien dans ma mélancolie / N'a bougé! palais neufs, échafaudages, blocs, / Vieux faubourgs, tout pour moi devient allégorie / Et mes chers souvenirs sont plus lourds que des rocs.* Charles Baudelaire, "Le Cygne" ("The Swan"), *Les Fleurs du Mal (The Flowers of Evil)*, 1857.
- 2 Walter Benjamin, *Convolute [N3a,3], The Arcades Project*, published posthumously by Belknap/Harvard, 1999.
- 3 Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," *October*, vol. 12. (spring 1980).
- 4 Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940) in *Illuminations* (Fontana, London: 1940).
- 5 Stan Douglas, International Center of Photography Infinity Awards short film (2012), <http://www.icp.org/support-icp/infinity-awards/stan-douglas>.
- 6 See Gérard Genette, *Paratexts* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).
- 7 Stan Douglas, International Center of Photography Infinity Awards short film (2012), <http://www.icp.org/support-icp/infinity-awards/stan-douglas>.
- 8 Bill Nichols, "Documentary Reenactment and the Fantasmatic Subject," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 35, no. 1. (2008), pp. 72–89.
- 9 The Black Star archive was gifted to the Ryerson Image Centre, Toronto, in 2005. See Peggy Gale, ed., *Archival Dialogues: Reading the Black Star Archive* (Ryerson Image Centre, Toronto: 2012).
- 10 One of the landmark photographic projects of the post-1960s era is Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel's *Evidence* (1977), a book of fifty photographs gathered from numerous institutional archives made by technician-photographers in the name of science or forensic documentation. The surreal automatism of such documents out of context is compelling, while the book's undercurrents of paranoia, repression, and secrecy are darkly comic. For the attentive, *Evidence* also provides a neat schooling in the arcane world of "technician photography."
- 11 Tommy Simeons, ed., *Stan Douglas: Midcentury Studio* (Ludion, 2011).
- 12 Perhaps the finest example of this in art has been the exhibition 1979: *A Monument to Radical Instants*, curated by Carles Guerra for La Virreina Barcelona in 2011.
- 13 See for example the folio "Adjet [sic]: Un Précurseur de la Photographie Moderne," in *L'Art Vivant*, January 1, 1928.
- 14 *Abbott & Cordova, 7 August 1971* is installed as a 50 x 30 ft. billboard in the public atrium of the new Woodward's building in Vancouver.

# **Crowds and Riots** 2008



This series comprises four large-scale photographs depicting significant gatherings of people, each pertaining to specific transitional moments from Vancouver's history. The photographs were created in the same manner as motion pictures, using either purpose-built sets or real locations and casting, dressing, and preparing actors for each historical period. Separate images were composited together to form each image. Digital photography was employed for its immediacy in working on set, as well as its chromatic and geometric stability for image assemblage. In the case of *Abbott & Cordova, 7 August 1971*, for example, fifty different photographs are brought together to depict a complex, tableaux-like setting that is made up of nine separate scenes.

Chronologically, we can view the depictions in each photograph as follows: In *Powell Street Grounds, 28 January 1912*, we see police cordoning off a small crowd and singling out key individuals. The image relates to the city of Vancouver's efforts to outlaw public gatherings in response to increased activities associated with the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), who were stirring up gatherings on matters of unemployment and the distribution of wealth. With the photograph *Ballantyne Pier, 18 June 1935*, Douglas has re-created a key moment in which police are engaging with protesting, unionized longshoremen. Using the backdrop of Vancouver's abandoned sugar refinery, we witness a small group being divided and arrested, just one scenario of many where over a thousand had been involved in agitations against their dismissals and replacements by scab workers. The photograph *Hastings Park, 16 July 1955* illustrates about forty people who are ostensibly cropped from a larger crowd of leisurely observers at the racetrack, all condensed together into a group of unwitting consumers. And *Abbott & Cordova, 7 August 1971*, which exists as a public installation today in the very location it references, depicts one corner of the Downtown Eastside riot, negligently provoked by the police themselves in response to a mild gathering of youth and hippies in a "smoke-in" organized by the then-alternative newspaper *The Georgia Straight*.

While three of these four images depict clashes between police and crowds, all of them illustrate the formation of individuals into groupings by internal and/or external forces. Further, in composing and establishing the scenarios, actions, and details of each image, Douglas has applied his study of photographs from different periods, as well as, where available, film footage, newspaper clippings, police reports, affidavits, interviews with observers and participants, and other archive materials.

When speaking about this series, Douglas references the paradigmatic images produced by journalistic documentation of the Battle of Cable Street in London in 1936. Careful comparison

between the *Crowds and Riots* series and these photographs reveals many powerful influences in the manner of individuals and bodies as they are compressed into groups, whether wishing to be or not. It is thus clear that with all four photographs, Douglas has been highly alert to the appearances and behavior of crowds: the manner of their organizing, construction, and positioning has been mimicked in great detail, from the positioning of heads, hats, and hands on shoulders in *Powell Street Grounds* to the nuanced relations between bodies on the stands depicted in *Hastings Park*.

In all, the photographs are constructions of historical memory—through a rigorous and complex process—into an image that, as the artist states, "consolidates hearsay," as well as facts and key research, into pictures that activate topical reflection and discussion, not only upon the conditions of these historical moments, but also upon the conditions of sociopolitical gatherings and groupings in our own time, influenced by today's inner and outer forces.











