

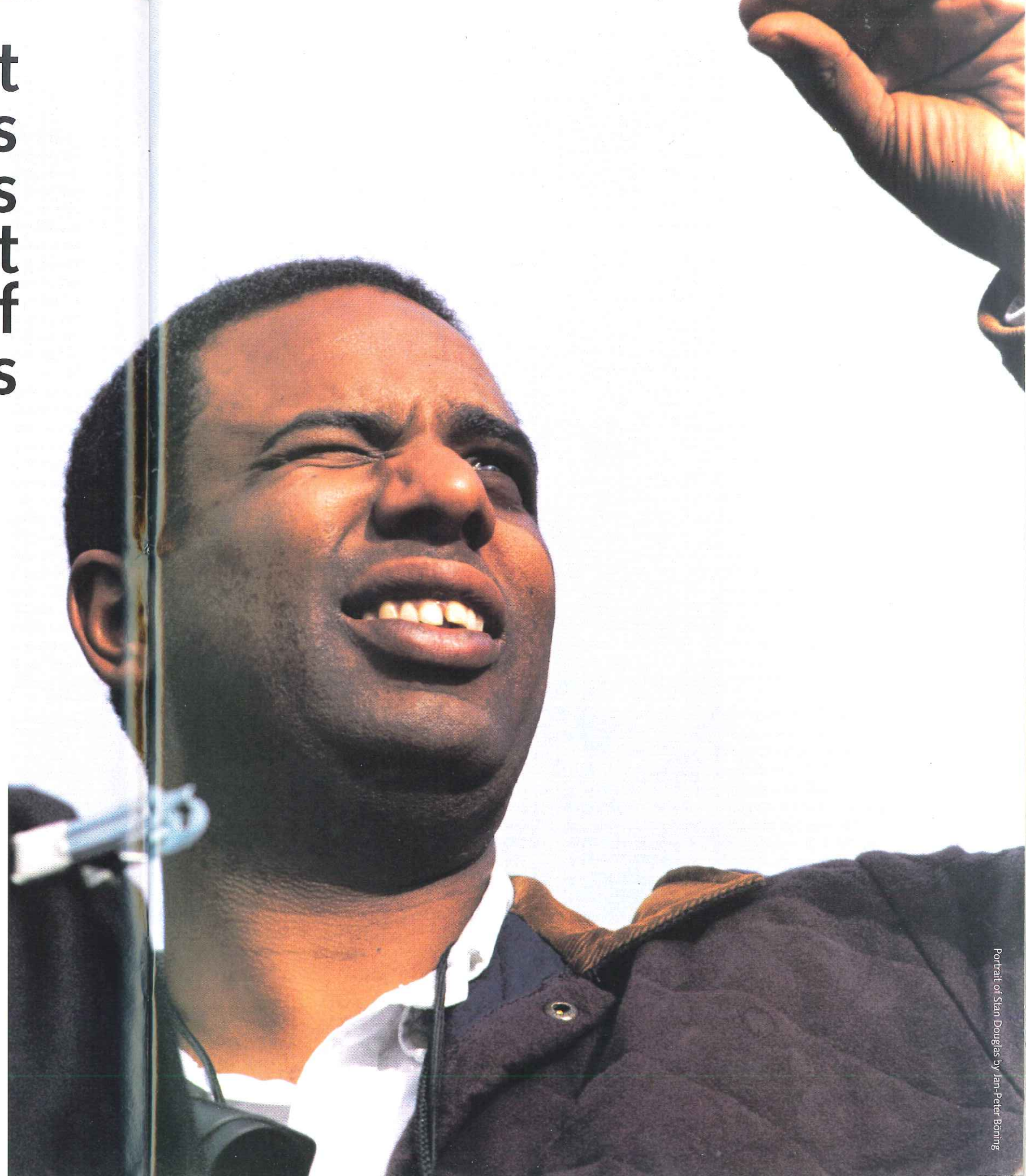
# Vancouver artist Stan Douglas excavates the ruins of the past in search of new utopias

by Scott Watson

Some histories are told and others aren't. Some reflect what the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard has called the "master narrative": the story we hear proclaimed most often, and that provides the groundwork for our understanding of the world. Other stories are murmured periodically, spoken in fragments only to fall again into silence. Theorists of postmodernism claim that this is what the commotion of our present cultural moment is all about: the loop of the master narrative has been broken, and other long-silenced voices can now be heard. Stan Douglas' art operates amid this fragmentation of old norms. He is interested in how one comes to understand history, and how one situates oneself within it as an artist. Douglas explores what he calls "idiomatic languages" of media to probe or discover how identity — that supposedly permanent thing we call the self — is shaped by the changing regimes of representation.

As a person of colour who grew up in Vancouver's homogeneously prosperous white Point Grey district, Douglas knows what it is like to be excluded from the picture, not to see oneself in the mirror the image industry holds up to youth. As he put it in a recent interview: "The doubt, that pronounal doubt, doubt of pronouns, doubt of the certainty of an I, is the *a priori* of my work. And it's a doubt which is understood by people who are outside of the dominant representation."

Douglas' "pronounal doubt" links his various forays into film, video and photography, including *Hors-Champs*, the work that made his European reputation at *Documenta* in 1992, and his upcoming project for the 1995 Whitney Biennial. It was already apparent in *Breath*, the piece he made for a student exhibition at the Emily Carr College of Art and Design in 1982. Even then, Douglas was exploring the ways in which sound and image could be stitched together to put something new and unexpected in



Portrait of Stan Douglas by Jan-Peter Böning

Making  
**History**



motion. A sequence of slide projections installed in a dark room provided a phrase-by-phrase English translation of a French nineteenth-century art song "Ô ma belle rebelle" by Charles Gounod. The slides were uniformly grey, like shots of the inside of a cloud; the phrases appeared on the bottom, in typewriter script, like the subtitles to a film. The effect was one of startling disjunction, as if the tenor's longing for an unattainable love was mirrored in the distance between Gounod's romantic melody and the cold hard text.

*Breath* later became the first half of a work entitled *Deux Devises* that was shown in a Vancouver movie theatre in 1983. In the second half, called *Mime*, an audio-tape of a 1936 Robert Johnson song, "Preachin' Blues," was juxtaposed with a sequence of close-up slides of Douglas' lips mouthing the words. The pictures of the artist's mouth, slightly out-of-sync with the song on the tape, created an effect that was impossibly awry.

"Preachin' Blues" is a dialogue between the singer and Satan at the crossroads of a tragic life. It speaks of the experience of black rural America. The Gounod song is from the nineteenth-century salons of Paris, and reflects the rarefied sensibilities of the haute-bourgeoisie at the centre of "civilization." By placing the two songs together — one with images, one without — Douglas called into question the hierarchy of values we assign to the expressions of different peoples when we call something "high art" or "folk art." In this case, the high-art song ultimately seemed a trivial confection, and the blues lament a blood-curdling existential scream. Yet, in the end, Douglas' theme in *Deux Devises* was surely his own doubt that he can find himself reflected in either of the two musical forms.

Douglas' skepticism about identity and selfhood has, for many years, been reinforced by his reading of the works of the Irish-born writer Samuel Beckett, the poet of modern disintegration and alienation who himself wrote from the margins. Rather than reading Beckett as a writer who mourns the loss of certainties, Douglas sees him in a special way: as someone who proposes a new strategy for "how to say 'I,' without certainty, but without that being a problem." Beckett's example — especially his invention of drama stripped of its normal human interplay and incident — served as a model for two series of video-works Douglas made for broadcast on commercial television in 1989 and 1991. The "monodramas," as Douglas called them, are short (most last less than sixty seconds). The idea was to mimic the buildup of a television drama or the life-style jolt of television advertising without actually delivering a plot or a product. One monodrama shows a school bus narrowly missing a car at an urban intersection; another shows someone not answering a telephone. Some carry implicit social content. In

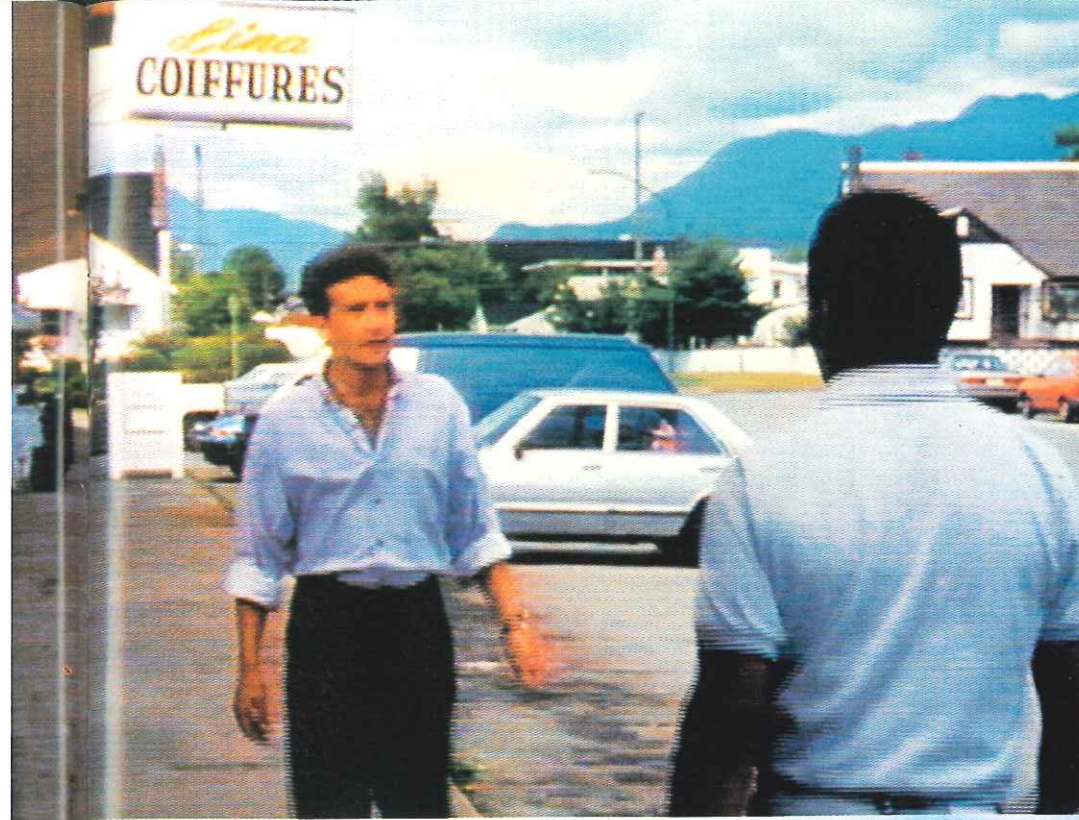
*I'm not Gary*, two male figures — one white, the other black — approach each other on a sidewalk outside a suburban mall. The white man greets the black man, saying, "Hi Gary," to which the black man turns and responds firmly, "I'm not Gary." This failure of recognition seems, on a micro-level, to represent a whole society that names its minorities without hearing their voices.

The most Beckett-like of the monodramas features an actor whose face has been digitized to prevent recognition. He delivers a rambling monologue about feeling fragmented in a sea of free-floating anxiety and guilt. It's a voice in exile, alienated from social function and context. This voice, adrift in a play of wandering consciousness and unstable identity, undermines the upbeat fictions sold by television programming. Douglas' monodramas destabilize the viewer, if only momentarily, and cause small eruptions of wakefulness in the collective dozing of television viewing. This attempt to breach habitual consciousness is utopian, but there's no secret message here, no new map of how the world works. Just the affirmation that the viewer, thrown back on his or her own resources, can begin to invent, not merely receive, the world.

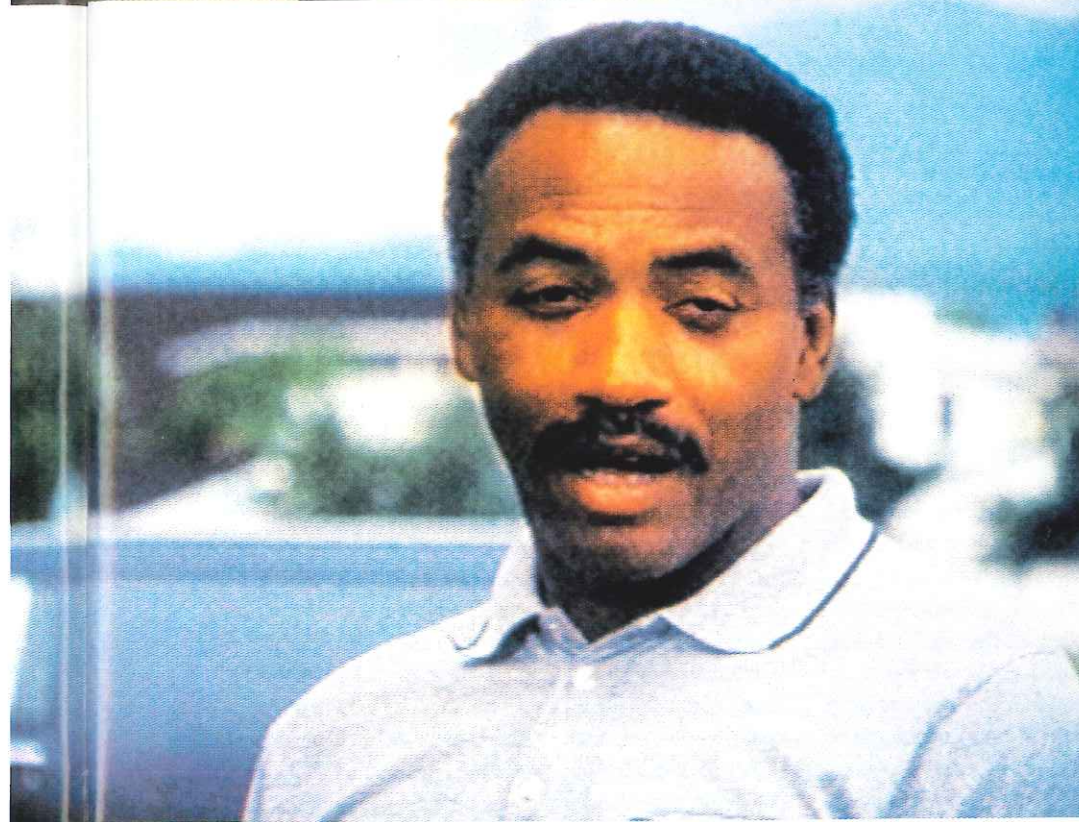
In *Hors-Champs*, originally made for the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, and restaged at *Documenta* — the international salon of contemporary art held every five years in Kassel, Germany — a paper-thin screen hangs in the middle of an empty room. Scenes from what appears to be a historic studio jazz session are projected on both sides. The music we hear is Albert Ayler's 1965 composition, "Spirits Rejoice," a jazz piece that uses recognizable citations from "La Marseillaise" and "Maryland, My Maryland," both hymns to the revolutionary spirit of modernity's oldest republics: France and America. The music combines the intellectual atonality of high modernism — and thus the themes of exile, alienation and disintegration — with the free jazz rhythms favoured by the African-American musicians living in Paris in the nineteen-sixties. Always marginal to more popularly accepted forms of jazz, free jazz was abandoned as the idealism of the sixties clouded over.

For one side of the screen, Douglas created a simulated documentary video, the sort of thing that might have been produced for television in the sixties. The camera tracks the jazz musicians as they take up the themes of the piece and play their instruments. The other side shows what might have been out-takes, dwelling on players at rest and the spaces between them.

Viewing *Hors-Champs* is a frustrating experience. There is no easy ready-made space for the viewer to inhabit, no single vantage point from which the viewer perceives the scene. The two sides of the screen do not, like Michael Snow's double-sided screenwork



*I'm not Gary*,  
Monodrama video still 1991  
Upper: courtesy of David Zwirner Gallery  
Lower: courtesy Witte de With, Rotterdam  
Photo: Bob Goedewaagen

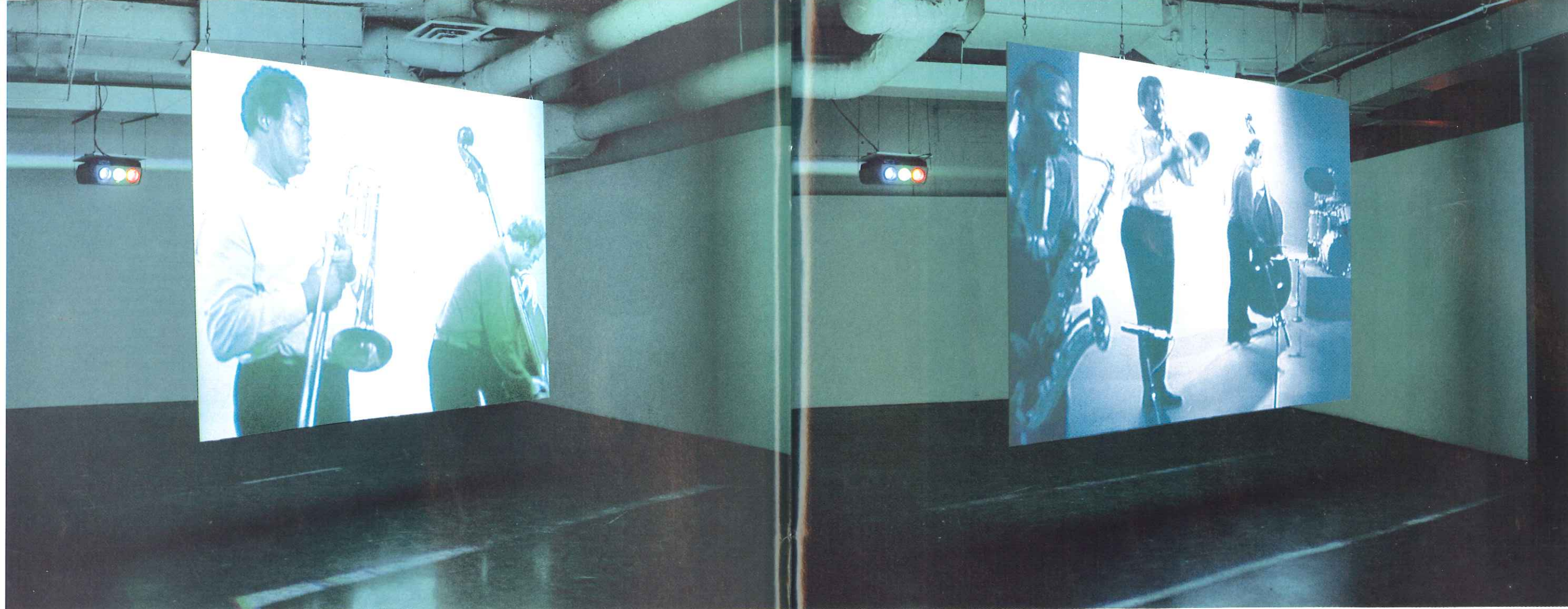


Lower left: *Disagree*,  
Monodrama video still 1991  
Courtesy: David Zwirner Gallery

Lower right: *Guilty III*,  
Monodrama video still 1991  
Courtesy: David Zwirner Gallery







*Hors-Champs* 1992  
Two-channel video installation  
Photo: Isaac Applebaum  
Courtesy: Art Gallery of York University

*Two Sides to Every Story* (1974), present the recto and verso of the same situation. In *Hors-Champs*, you can't infer from one side what is happening on the other; neither can you experience both sides simultaneously. The work thus represents the antithesis of single-point Renaissance perspective. As the music is taken up by one player, then another, the viewer feels obliged to move from side to side in an effort to come to some understanding, embodying the contradictions between European modernism and Afro-American culture that the music attempts to synthesize.

Douglas' recent installation work, *Pursuit, Fear, Catastrophe: Ruskin, B.C.*, first shown at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1993, draws together many of the same themes: the history of modern music, of migration and exile, and of media. The town of Ruskin, named for the great English art critic and utopian social theorist, was established in 1896 as a cooperative commune. The original cooperative depended on a lumber mill to

fund their community, but the mill went bankrupt after a year. Between the wars, and until the Japanese internment of 1942, the area around Ruskin had a large Japanese population. They farmed and ran two small mills. In 1929, the B.C. Electric Company built a dam and hydroelectric power plant at Ruskin. This somewhat fanciful art-deco, neo-Gothic plant is a central character in Douglas' film.

A large screen hovers over a grand piano. Bleachers like those you'd find at a neighbourhood playing field are provided for the viewer. The black-and-white sixteen-millimeter silent film is about fourteen minutes long, and Douglas has devised an attachment to the projector so that the film plays again and again without interruption, the end stitched to the beginning. Early in the film the piano begins to play itself. The score is a piano transcription of Arnold Schönberg's odd "Accompaniment to a Cinematographic Scene: Danger Threatens, Panic, Catastrophe," a composition that

Schönberg wrote in 1930, at the end of the silent film era. One imagines that the composer's intention was ironic.

Set at the same time that Schönberg wrote his score, Douglas' film is a dead ringer for a vintage silent film, down to the subtitles that provide highlights of the dialogue. Except for a few deliberate anachronisms like mobile homes and contemporary automobiles, the film is a period piece. The story is based on Douglas' research into old police records concerning the enigmatic disappearance of a Japanese worker at the Ruskin power plant and the subsequent half-hearted police investigation. As viewers, we mainly follow the efforts of the missing worker's roommate and friend — also a Japanese worker in Ruskin — to get answers from the police. In the telling details, we get a picture of society in British Columbia circa 1939 as a colonial culture riddled with racism and complacency.

*Ruskin* is both a mournful and a pessimistic work, a

catalogue of modern alienation. We see how colonial and corporate powers crisscrossed the landscape with dams and wires, and how they policed the frontier. This isn't a story of triumph through progress. Instead, this is an account of someone whose story has been lost in a Kafkaesque web of bureaucracy. Until we find that missing person, Douglas might be saying, we're fated to live in the shadow of a past we don't comprehend.

Like much of Douglas' work, the absent subject dominates the centre. There's no one playing the piano. The film is a story about a disappearance. The Japanese who were interned in 1942 never returned. The Ruskinian commune collapsed. The neo-Gothic style of the power plant itself spoke of a world view that unreflectingly celebrated progress in terms of God's dominion over man, and man's dominion over nature. It's a world view that collapsed after World War II, leaving the public realm littered with empty





*Pursuil, Fear, Catastrophe: Ruskin, B.C.* 1993  
Installation view  
Photo: Bob Goedewaagen  
Courtesy: Witte de With, Rotterdam



*Evening* 1994  
Installation view  
Courtesy: Institute of Contemporary Arts, London

monuments. The technology of film, once thought to have the potential to mobilize the masses for revolution, has turned out to be another opiate. Schönberg's music has yet to overtake Brahms' popularity in concert halls. Modernity itself contemplates its past as an unfinished, mostly failed project to make a new world culture from contemporary experience. But there is also a polemical energy at work in Douglas' *Ruskin*. The work is utopian in its mining of long-abandoned local histories. The Japanese workers are foregrounded. As well, the bleachers situate the viewers as a collective, as if they could act together to make a new society.

Douglas' most recent completed work, commissioned by the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, is entitled *Evening*. The piece had its first showing at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London this fall, and will be presented as part of the inaugural exhibition at the new San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in January 1995.

To create this piece, Douglas produced three simulated newscasts, using actors as anchors. Their performances were coupled with archival news footage from 1969-70, just after the time of the infamous 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago. It was during this period — and around this event — that "happy talk" was introduced into local news shows, and media started down the slippery slope of infotainment. The three newscasts are shown simultaneously. From most points in the gallery the sounds merge, but from other points one newscast or another emerges distinct and clear. As in his other works, like *Hors-Champs*, we are asked to move around, a shifting that mirrors the works themselves, in which the documentary is mixed with simulation.

Currently Douglas is working in Berlin as a guest of

the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst, the internationally acclaimed academy of new art that has served as a home away from home to a prestigious array of artists. Douglas spent the fall shooting in Potsdam, near what was once East Berlin, to produce a new work for this spring's Whitney Biennial in New York. For this piece, Douglas is working with a number of elements: film footage of an old Russian barracks and of Potsdam's Schreber gardens, and E.T.A. Hoffman's short story "The Sandman." The Schreber gardens, common throughout Germany, were the brainchild of nineteenth-century sociologist Daniel Schreber, the father of Freud's famous paranoid patient of the same name. The little plots, originally set aside for apartment dwellers, are on lands now being reclaimed by their pre-Communist owners. They will probably be lost to new development. The barracks, too, are destined for oblivion, instant ruins of the Cold War.

Once again, Douglas pursues the theme of an abandoned utopia. Yet for all its subversive intent, his art doesn't preach or proscribe. The histories and references that go into his installations might make the work difficult for viewers schooled to passively absorb works of art when they go to a gallery. Douglas' art does require some participation and effort, and that effort doesn't promise to deliver up a neat meaning. Instead the viewer might find that an irritant has entered his consciousness, a burr that could catch a thread on the garment of received ideas and start a process of unravelling.

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