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Production stills, Abbott & Cordova,
April 10 and 11, 2008

1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, 9, and 10:
Photos: Linda Chinfen

4: Photo: Stan Douglas

7: Photo: Rosamond Norbury



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Production stills, Abbott & Cordova, April 10 and 11, 2008

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PERFORMING PHOTOGRAPHY AFTER FILM

Sven Lütticken

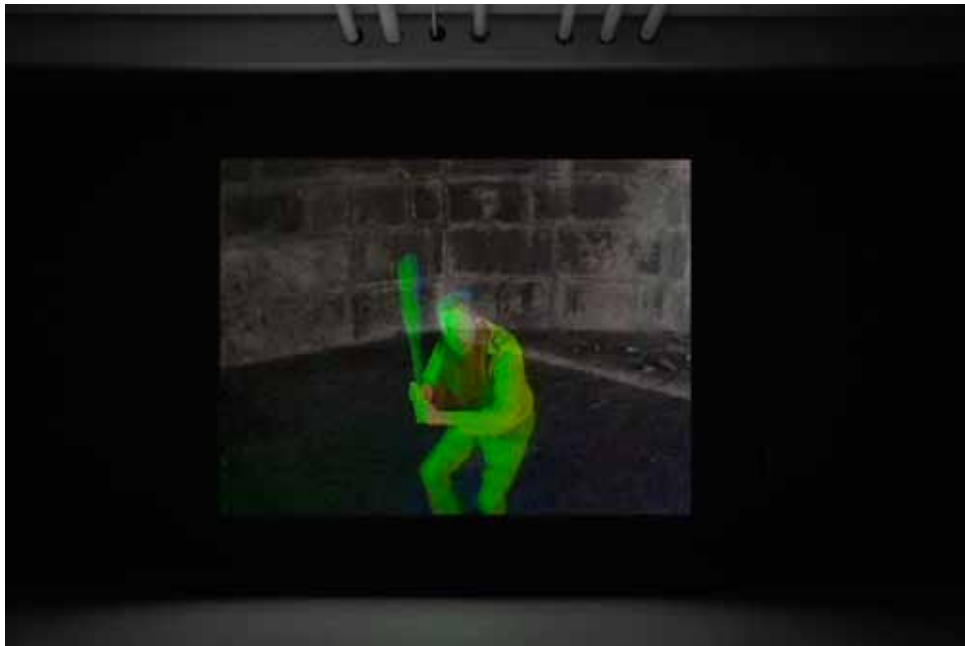
One cannot simply describe Stan Douglas as a filmmaker, or as a photographer—or even as a filmmaker and photographer. He works in these media, but perhaps even more so he works in between them (and others). Clearly, then, a discussion of Douglas’s use of these media is central to any analysis of his work; after all, these are not neutral vehicles for some predetermined ideal content, for some quasi-Platonic ideas or concepts. On the other hand, neither should one think of the works as being completely derived from the properties of these media. If the first (idealist or conceptualist) approach would seem to be completely discredited, the second (seemingly materialist) approach still rears its head from time to time. It tends to turn the work of art into a seamless whole, since it accepts no “apart from” the medium, no surplus, no fissures or conflicts within the work of art.¹ But the media technologies employed by Douglas are themselves already fractured and striated; they are composed of technological and cultural layers, and Douglas’s formal or structural decisions seem intent on unraveling, rather than glossing over, the composite nature of these media.

To present Douglas’s works as seamless entities would be to regress to an idealist aesthetic that states that form and content coincide completely in genuine works of art. Hegel’s argument in *Science of Logic*—that content is nothing but the *transformation of form into content* and vice versa—was an important challenge to simplistic distinctions between a pre-given content and form as something imposed on it. Yet Hegel’s lectures on aesthetics would curtail the dialectic of form and content by glorifying classical Greek art as having reached the perfect harmony of form and content, with later art representing a long decline because post-antique, Christian content was beyond embodiment in physical form.² Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* can be seen as an extended argument against the idealist fetishization of harmony, of the work of art as a seamless symbol. Adorno deconstructs this idealist dialectic, describing form as “sedimented content” and noting that “those traits of radical art that have caused it to be ostracized as formalist are all caused by content twitching physically in it, content that has not a priori been clipped by conventional harmony.”³ In other words: with Beckett or Mondrian (but not, say, Vasarely), form is shaped by heteronomous forces, by historical

¹ Concerned with what he sees as the refusal of those whom he—in a charmingly patronizing gesture—calls “sensitive critics” to come to terms with “the love affair between Stan Douglas and machines,” George E. Lewis overreacts by claiming that there is no “apart from” technology in Douglas’s work. However, there clearly *is* an “apart from”—not, obviously, in the humanist sense of some essential content that remains unchanged by the technology, but in the form of elements that are only partly transformed through it, that resist complete assimilation and transmutation. George E. Lewis, “Stan Douglas’s *Suspiria*: Genealogies of Recombinant Narrativity,” *Stan Douglas: Past Imperfect, Works 1986–2007* (Staatsgalerie Stuttgart/Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart, 2007), 53.

² G.W.F. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften I: Wissenschaft der Logik*, Werke vol. 8 (Frankfurt am main: Suhrkaom, 1986), 265.

³ “Vollends die Züge der radikalen kunst, derentwillen man sie als Formalismus ostraziert hat, stammen ausnabmslos daher, dass Inhalt in ihnen leibhaftig zuckt, nicht vorweg von gängiger Harmonie zurechtgestutzt wurde.” Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973), 218. Author’s translation.



Stan Douglas, *Suspiria*, 2003. Single-channel video installation; infinite permutations. Installed at Documenta 11, Kassel, 2002

experiences and exigencies. For all its hyper-controlled appearances, good modernism twitches and itches. Its content manifests itself in forms whose origins cannot be explained by formalist ideologies. However, referring to the Warburg Institute and to Benjamin’s book on the Baroque *Trauerspiel*, Adorno also concedes that more narrowly defined “content,” such as iconographical motifs, should not be neglected; such motifs are “supports of substance [*Gebalt*] against the pressure of subjective intention.”⁴

In the 1960s and 1970s, structuralism attempted to do away with the dialectic of form and content for good by analyzing works of art as differential signifying structures. Permutational works by Stan Douglas such as *Suspiria* or *Journey into Fear* can be seen as structuralist exercises. Their programmed, rigidly aleatory sequences are not externally imposed on some primordial layer of “content,” and yet the work does not dissolve in its structure, does not coincide with it. To think that there is no outside, no supplement, was precisely the idealist regression inherent in some less sophisticated versions of structuralism in the humanities, which assumed that the work would become transparent with the right theory in hand. One of the fundamental experiences that one can have when confronted with Stan Douglas’s works is that they are both excessively rich and reticent; that they come with a surplus that may also, depending on the viewer and the situation, be experienced as a lack. If you get the references to Melville’s *The Confidence-Man* in *Journey into Fear* but not to the various *Journey into Fear* films, the work takes on a different character than if the reverse is the case. Douglas’s short essay on the piece, which develops some of its sources and its implications, may be seen as a supplement that is actually part of the piece that it supplements—part of its surplus, which is to say, of its lack.⁵

⁴ “Die inhaltlichen Momente sind Stützen des Gebalts wider den Druck der subjektiven Intention.” Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 219. Author’s translation.

⁵ Stan Douglas, “Journey into Fear” [2001], in *Stan Douglas: Journey into Fear* (London: Serpentine Gallery, 2002), 135–138.

Something similar can be said of *Abbott & Cordova, 7 August 1971*, which depicts the violent disruption of a public protest by the Vancouver police. Douglas links this incident to the subsequent transformation of the Gastown area into a purely commercial district.⁶ It is self-evident that this complex history is not self-evident from the photograph, which can however be an occasion for fleshing out this history, similar to the way in which *Every Building on 100 West Hastings* was explored in a previous publication.⁷ Such historical analyses can be said to stand apart from Douglas’s use of media and technologies, but they nonetheless respond to something that is both integral to and, perhaps, not fully integrated in the work. The same can be said of the media history or media archaeology that Douglas practices with his work: like Melville’s confidence man, it is never fully present.

After the Cinema

Abbott & Cordova, 7 August 1971 is part of Douglas’s photographic series *Crowds & Riots*, which also includes photos such as *Hastings Park, 16 July 1955* (2008). These works differ from most previous photographic work by Douglas, which depicted sites related to his films—crumbling Detroit, German allotment gardens, architecture in Havana. However, *Abbott & Cordova*, while also existing as a “regular” photographic print, functions as a public art piece on a monumental scale, lit from behind like a back-projection in film production, and the staged and composited nature of the photo obviously has filmic connotations. The same goes for the production process; the set and the shoot have been compared, by Douglas and by critics, to film sets and shoots. Vancouver is the third-busiest location for film shoots in North America, with the city usually functioning as a more or less generic American backdrop; Douglas in fact built a backdrop of a Vancouver street corner to excavate some of this image-city’s less visible historical layers.⁸

Stan Douglas’s work is part of a context in which Modernist definitions of medium-specificity seem as anachronistic as grand utopian claims about the fusion of media into a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. At different moments in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, both the “purification” of artistic media or their combination in

⁶ See the interview with Stan Douglas by Alexander Alberro in this publication.

⁷ Reid Shier, ed., *Stan Douglas: Every Building on 100 West Hastings* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press and Contemporary Art Gallery, 2002).

⁸ On Vancouver as film location, and on Vancouver in an event- and image-driven economy in general, see Alissa Firth-Eagland, “Invisible Becoming,” in *Momentarily: Learning from Mega-Events*, Bik Van der Pol, Alissa Firth-Eagland and Urban Subjects eds. (Vancouver: Western Front, 2011), 5–13.

quasi-organic totalities seemed to promise relief from capitalist instrumentalization—the former, because it seemed to offer an antidote to the kitsch of the culture industry, and the latter, because it suggested the possibility of reversing the alienation and fragmentation of capitalist production by integrating not only various arts, but most importantly art and life.⁹ But the grand socio-artistic dreams of Wagner, of the Bauhaus, or indeed of Fascism have been replaced by pragmatic media integration through digitization. The media retain vestiges of specificity, but in many ways they survive as cultural codes or layerings of conventions more than as media in the old sense, with a specific material basis.¹⁰ Douglas’s practice is marked by an engagement with the theatre, especially Beckett, but this theatre is impure and partly shaped by other media, as shown by a work such as *Vidéo*, which refers to Beckett’s *Film*. Film, of course, is one major source of references for Douglas’s work, and some of his work of the late 1980s and early 1990s can be seen as having inaugurated a wave of “cinematic” art in galleries and museums.

However, this cinematic art is a manifestation of a *post-cinematic* regime in which the cinema has lost its cultural dominance and in which cinematic tools and tropes find refuge in the art world. Often, cinematic art uses the very medium that brought film down: video is habitually employed to recycle film clips. When Douglas employs video, in works such as *Monodramas*, *Hors-Champs*, *Suspiria*, and *Vidéo*, the works both reflect and reflect on the medium and its complex historical role, including its relation with film; in *Suspiria*, the colour of NTSC images evokes the saturated technicolour of Dario

Argento’s film of the same name. In works in which filmic references are more prominent, such as *Journey into Fear*, or *Inconsolable Memories*, Douglas’s medium of choice is film rather than video, but this is film as remediated by post-cinematic technology: the film loops are accompanied by a soundtrack which, thanks to computer programs tailor-made for these pieces, produces a staggering number of dialogue and voice-over permutations, resulting in near-endless films that could not be more different from standard features. A charade on a cargo ship that references both



Stan Douglas,
Inconsolable Memories,
2005. Two-channel
16mm film installation;
15 permutations, 5:39
each loop. Film still

⁹ See Jens Schröter, “The Politics of Intermediality,” www.acta.sapientia.ro/acta-film/C2/film2-6.pdf
¹⁰ Rosalind Krauss focuses on the “layers of conventions” inherent in a medium in *“A Voyage on the North Sea”*: *Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999).



Stan Douglas, *Malecón (Cuba)*,
2004. Digital chromogenic print.
Image dimensions: 49¼ x 94¼ in

films called *Journey into Fear* and Melville’s *The Confidence-Man* in order to reflect on the transformations of capitalism in the last half-century, Douglas’s *Journey into Fear* is literally unwatchable: it is impossible to see the film in its entirety.

We are dealing, then, with a post-cinematic temporality that is connected to television rather than film. Like *Journey into Fear*, television goes on and on and on. *Suspiria*, made for documenta 11 in Kassel, makes this latent “televisual” nature of much of Douglas’s work explicit. Employing real television technology, *Suspiria* consisted of a continuous live video feed from the dungeon-like spaces underneath the Hercules Moment in the park of Schloss Wilhelmshöhe in Kassel; these images were mixed with footage recorded in a studio of scenes based on Grimm fairytales, with some Marx thrown in, permutated by a computer program in such a way that they became ever more disjointed through the course of time (disjointed and darkly funny, *Suspiria* is a gothic comedy). Douglas’s work is cinematic precisely insofar as it is post-cinematic; in other words, it is part of the migration of cinematic tropes into the wider culture at the precise moment when the cinema as a system of production and distribution, as exemplified by the Hollywood studio system, had all but collapsed. This collapse did not mean the end of film as a cultural force; rather, film was now everywhere: on TV, on video (and later DVD), and in magazines and countless books.

One form of the cinema’s post-cinematic afterlife was the film still, which came to play a prominent role in art in the late 1970s. Here one can think, obviously, of Cindy Sherman’s *Untitled Film Stills* but also of the image of the falling man that Robert Longo culled from a still of Fassbinder’s *The American Soldier*, and of Jeff Wall’s “cinematic” light-box photographs.¹¹ Film stills seemed to distill the essence of the filmic, as Barthes put it, suggesting potential narratives beyond stock formulas, lifting moments of pure

¹¹ Wall distinguishes between his “cinematographic photographs,” which involve some degree of staging or of alterations to the location, and his “documentary photographs.”

cinema from humdrum plots. Although the still has of course accompanied the cinema almost from the beginning, it unfolded its potential in a period when, on the one hand, *Cahiers du cinéma*-style cinephile culture experienced its Indian Summer, while on the other hand the arrival of the Spielberg-style blockbuster signaled a fundamental change in the cultural climate, in which the production and distribution of “difficult” films would itself become ever more difficult.¹²

The photographs accompanying Stan Douglas works such as *Nu•tka*, *Der Sandmann*, or *Le Détroit* are not film stills, though they perform some of their functions. They show locations or sites associated with the films, but they do not show characters or actions, nor do they mimic the film’s style. While film stills traditionally do differ from actual film frames—they are shot on the set by a photographer—they hardly exacerbate the differences to the extent that Douglas’s photos do. Still, Douglas’s photos are clearly offshoots of the film projects; they cannot lay claim to being “purely photographic.” Rather, they are part of the films’ intermedial unfolding. With *Abbott & Cordova*, Douglas does create a more explicitly “cinematic” photograph, a still motion picture. One way of analyzing this media hybrid is in terms of the dialectic of *image* and *picture*.

De- and rematerialization

In contrast to “picture,” the term “image” can be used for mental or dream images. “Picture” has strong connotations of a concrete, physical artifact, though the “moving pictures” of the cinema have something of the quality of ephemeral dream images. In the first version of his “Pictures” essay, which accompanied the eponymous exhibition, Douglas Crimp noted that “[to] an ever greater extent our experience is governed by pictures, pictures in newspapers and magazines, on television and in the cinema.”¹³ Crimp then focused on pictures as more or less concrete entities in various media. In the second version of the text, he would pit his approach against Michael Fried’s longing for transcendental “presentness” in his essay *Art and Objecthood*, creating an anti-Friedian genealogy (going back to Mallarmé) of work that does “not seek the transcendence of the material conditions of the signs through which meaning is generated.”¹⁴ However, as Crimp noted, the “paradox of the picture” is that it is “simultaneously present and remote”; the first version of his essay in particular examined how some artists create

¹² For a trenchant characterization of this development and some of its consequences, see Hito Steyerl, “In Defense of the Poor Image,” in *e-flux journal* 10 (November 2009), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/view/94>
¹³ Douglas Crimp, “Pictures,” in *Pictures* (New York: Artists Space, 1977), 3.
¹⁴ Douglas Crimp, “Pictures” (second version from 1979), in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York/Boston: New Museum of Contemporary Art/David R. Godine, 1984), 186.

“La Plus Grande Photographie de la guerre.” *L’Illustration*, December 19, 1917



images that evoke dreams or memories, noting the case of a work by Troy Brauntuch that it is “the materialization of reverie.”¹⁵

One can read both versions of Crimp’s essay against the background of developments in modern media technology. With photography, images seemed to aspire to the status of reverie—materialized in prints, to be sure, but never firmly tied to a single materialization. An intriguing text from the nineteenth century in which photography was presented as an agent of dematerialization was written in 1859 by Oliver Wendell Holmes, who stated: “Form is henceforth divorced from matter. In fact, matter as a visible object is of no great use any longer. Give us a few negatives of a thing worth seeing, taken from different points of view, and that is all we want of it. Pull it down or burn it up, if you please ... Matter in large masses must always be fixed and dear; form is cheap and transportable. We have got the fruit of creation now, and need not trouble ourselves with the core.”¹⁶ Photography, then, seemed to present form without matter, a form that for Holmes is equal to content—pure visual information that can be contained in “a few negatives.” These negatives function as virtual or potential images waiting to be actualized in prints, in pictures.

Photography was thus positioned as the anti-monumental medium par excellence, replacing heavy volume with infra-thin images. Holmes, writing in an age of long exposures, still considered the task of “mobile” photography to be the registration of stationary bodies. The emergence of the snapshot has obviously changed this—and indeed an early monumental photograph (the size of a massive history painting), a scene of a Canadian unit in combat exhibited in 1917 in Paris, extolled this characteristic of the medium (see above).¹⁷ Usually, Stan Douglas photographs refrain from showing

¹⁵ Crimp, “Pictures” (1979), 10, 14.
¹⁶ Oliver Wendell Holmes, “The Stereoscope and the Stereograph,” in *The Atlantic Monthly* 3, no. 20 (June 1859), 738–48, <http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/issues/1859jun/holmes.htm>
¹⁷ This monumental photograph, which was assembled from five partial prints of the “*splendide instantané*” taken on April



Vimy, “snap shot.”
Canadian War Museum,
George Metcalf
Archival Collection,
CWM 19920085-915

human actions, focusing instead on the landscape and architecture of sites related to his film projects, but in the case of *Abbott & Cordova*, a staged “cinematic” scene takes on photographic form. Rather than replacing a building, it transforms a building by infiltrating it with a quasi-filmic scene of another location that had been reconstructed in the form of a movie-type set—a Potemkin village, a hollowed-out copy of the street corner.

In the meantime, of course, technology has made yet another leap into the dematerialized. Douglas’s photo is an image without an original; it is a digital composite of

numerous shots. Writing about digital culture, Boris Groys has emphasized that digital images need to be performed in order to be seen. “Digital images have the propensity to generate, to multiply, and to distribute themselves almost anonymously through the open fields of contemporary communication. The origin of these messages is difficult, or even impossible, to locate, much like the origin of divine, religious messages. At the same time, digitalization seems to guarantee a literal reproduction of a text or an image more effectively than any other known technique. Naturally, it is not so much the digital image itself as the image file, the digital data which remains identical through the process of its reproduction and distribution. However, the image file is not an image—the image file is invisible. The digital image is an effect of the visualization of the invisible image file, of the invisible digital data. [...] Digital data should be visualized, should become an image that can be seen. Here we have a situation wherein the perennial spirit/matter dichotomy is reinterpreted as a dichotomy between digital file and its visualization, or ‘immaterial information’ and ‘material’ image, including visible text.”¹⁸

What I have termed the dialectic of image and picture prefigures some of the aspects of Groys’s dichotomy, which can be seen as its digital incarnation. With analog photography and film, we are dealing with images that are *potential pictures* until they are realized by being printed (photography) or screened (film). In the latter case, that of moving pictures, they always retain a somewhat dream-like and unreal character. Film stills seem to “fix” this; here the film truly becomes a picture, yet this picture also teems with potential films, generating mental images. With Stan Douglas’s photographs, it can be an interesting experience to see them before having seen the

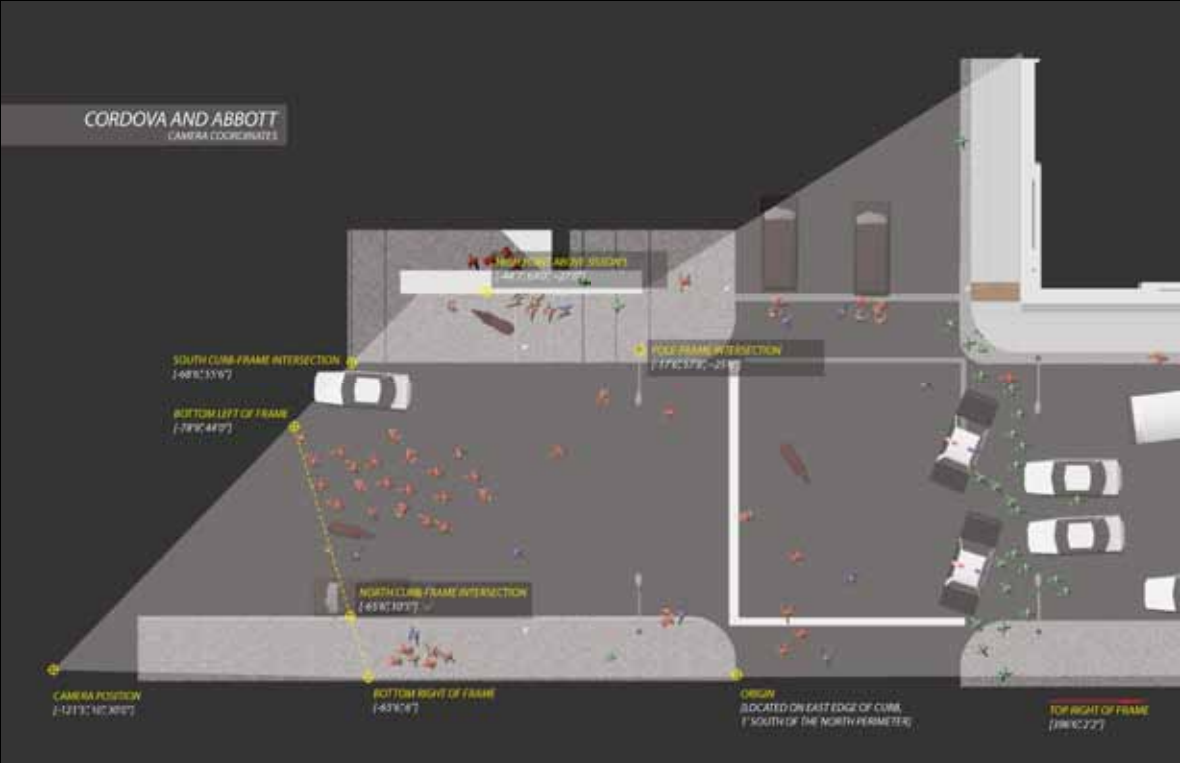
film; their photographic qualities assert themselves, but on the other hand, one cannot help speculating and fantasizing about the film to which they are related, turning them into projection screens for one’s expectations. In the case of *Abbott & Cordova*, the situation is different: the film *is* the photo.

The image is a narrative, quasi-cinematic photo showing actors or extras in a number of groups or constellations, but perhaps the main performative dimension is not to be located here, but in Douglas’s assemblage, creating a digital image waiting to become picture. *Abbott & Cordova* exists in the form of a “regular” gallery print, a part of Douglas’s photo series *Crowds & Riots*, but this version is somewhat eclipsed by the one installed in the atrium of the Woodward’s building. Here, the image file is “performed” in a very specific and very public setting. Passersby participate in its collective staging.

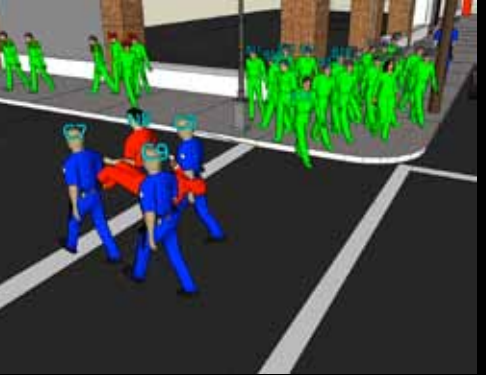
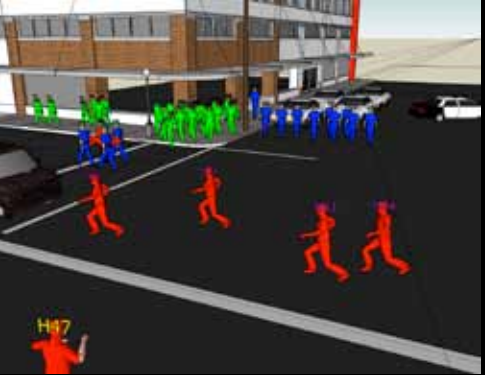
Open to the gaze from both sides, its visibility depending on the light at any given moment, the work functions as a large slide that has been integrated with the architecture. Here, photography does not replace matter but infiltrates it, with a result that may be *cinematic* not primarily because of the set or the elaborate shoot, but because it exists in a montage with the flux of passersby, of potential spectators who cannot help becoming performers themselves. The result is a perpetually shifting constellation. Refusing to blend its component parts into a romantic symbol, into an organic whole, the work also invites the viewer-performer to engage in an additional act: to study and reflect on Vancouver’s urban and social history.

9, 1917, measured 3.35 x 6.10 m. See *L'Illustration*, December 19, 1917.

¹⁸ Boris Groys, “Religion in the Age of Digital Reproduction,” in *e-flux journal* 4 (March 2009), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/view/49>



Stan Douglas, Plan of shoot for Abbott & Cordova, 2008



Stan Douglas, 3-D model of shoot for Abbott & Cordova, 2008