

***Stan Douglas: Revealing Narratives*, PHI Foundation,
Montreal, February 9 to May 22, 2022, Curated by Cheryl Sim**

Raven Spiratos

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what it means to confront art's complexities. *A Black Gaze* is a welcome companion to *Listening to Images*, a timely reconsideration and application of what it means to listen to and through art.

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1. Tina M. Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).
2. Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone, 2008).
3. Campt, *Listening to Images*, 6–8.
4. bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992).
5. Tina M. Campt, *Other Germans: Black Germans and the Politics of Race, Gender and Memory in the Third Reich* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004); Tina M. Campt *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and The African Diaspora in Europe* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).
6. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).
7. Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (June 2008): 1–14.

Stan Douglas: Revealing Narratives

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Curated by Cheryl Sim

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PHI Foundation's *Revealing Narratives* exhibition comprised Stan Douglas's two photo series *Disco Angola* (2012) and *Penn Station's Half Century* (2021). In *Disco Angola*, Douglas assumes the role of a fictitious photojournalist from the 1970s who works in New York City, often attends the burgeoning disco scene, and frequently travels to Angola to report on the civil war. The series is set in 1974 and 1975, pivotal years for the world's political economy, marked by the oil crisis, the stock market crash, deteriorating US-Soviet ties, and civil wars. It also was the origin of



Stan Douglas: *Revealing Narratives* (installation view), PHI Foundation, 2022. Stan Douglas, *Club Versailles*, 1974, 2012; *A Luta Continua*, 1974, 2012. Digital C-prints mounted on Dibond aluminum. Courtesy of the artist, Victoria Miro and David Zwirner © PHI Foundation for Contemporary Art. Photo: Richard-Max Tremblay.

disco, which became a major genre for queer, Black and Latinx people in New York City and around the world. In the second series, Douglas reconstructs New York's original Penn Station as it existed at nine moments. *Disco Angola* was presented in the PHI Foundation building at 451 rue Saint-Jean while the Penn Station series hung in the Foundation building at 465 rue Saint-Jean.

Stan Douglas was born in Vancouver in 1960, where he is currently based. He has a remarkable international reputation and was chosen to represent Canada at the 59th Venice Biennale in 2022. His work examines photography as a medium, challenging "authenticity" by examining the connection between remembered past and fact. Archival research is integral to Douglas' process of reproducing and reinventing historical settings in digital images.

Sprawled out across all four floors of PHI Foundation, the *Disco Angola* portion of the exhibition features a total of eight pieces (of varying dimensions above 5' x 9'), two pieces to a floor, as per the artist's

vision. These large-scale panoramic photographs are paired, one work geographically tied to Angola and the other to New York. Writing for *Artforum* in 2012, Rachel Kushner explained: "Disco Angola, like its name, is a diptych: eight large-scale panoramic photographs, four related to disco, four to Angola, each carefully re-created either from a found source image or as an amalgamation of research and lore."¹ In Douglas' words: "The idea of *Disco Angola* is looking at how certain things which have positive possibility or a very momentary utopian possibility can often be ruined by the intrusion of some foreign forces."²

One such arrangement sees *A Luta Continua*, 1974 and *Two Friends*, 1975 compelled into dialogue with one another. In *A Luta Continua*, a figure with long wavy hair in a green jumpsuit stands outside, in front of a building painted with the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola party flag. On the lip of the building is written: "A LUTA CONTINUA VITORIA E CERTA" which translated from Portuguese into

English as “The struggle continues, victory is certain.” In *Two Friends*, a busy social scene unfolds, people at tables are engaged in lively conversation with drinks in hand. The focal point of the photograph, however, is the two silent people who seem to be in contemplation rather than conversation. The figure in the red evening dress and the plunging neckline places their sunglasses on the table where their elbow rests, while their gaze is pulled to the top left corner. Their companion, in a pastel green suit, with their elbow also on the table, has hand to head and stares directly at the viewer.

Displayed together, *A Luta Continua* and *Two Friends* ask the viewer to consider similarities and differences. The audio guide from the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia—where the exhibition travelled after Montreal—explores these questions and reminds visitors that “both the Angolan post-colonial revolutionary movement and the hedonistic nightclubs of the 1970s were confronted by forces of resistance.”³ Economic, social, and legal obstacles existed for both. Alongside this shared story of struggle, *Two Friends* is also showcasing white leisure in strong contrast to *A Luta Continua* where the subtext suggests unyielding Black activism and freedom fighting. The audio guide continues: “Do they [the two friends] support the marginalized partygoers? Are they friends? A bored, disenchanted couple? Or announcing the growing commercialization of Disco?”⁴

A second example is the pairing of *Capoeira, 1974* with *Kung-Fu*

Fighting, 1975. During Angola’s fight for independence from the colonial empire, dancing also functioned as a means of self-expression and escape. In *Capoeira, 1974*, a group of rebel fighters create a half-circle around two of their companions while they perform capoeira. This dance-martial arts fusion was developed in the sixteenth century by West Africans who had been sent to Brazil as enslaved people by Portuguese colonizers. Prohibited from their cultural practices and rituals, capoeira was created and disguised as a dance with the addition of instruments and songs. Douglas states: “My fantasy was what would happen if there were fighters from South America who came to Angola via Cuba and showed the locals an unfamiliar dance that was in fact their own.”⁵

By contrasting capoeira with disco music, Douglas invites viewers to consider the African origins of both and their complex political contexts, both having catalyzed strong, shared artistic expression that crystallized into two major cultural movements. Douglas comments: “It was a time of the greatest concentration of wealth and the least amount of productivity. What the Angolan Civil War and disco shared, in their earliest moments, was that they were both utopian spaces destroyed by the intrusion of outsiders.”⁶ This photographic pairing also highlights the importance of the body in both the Angolan independence movement and the disco scene. Both moments in time found freedom through the body’s expression of dance: capoeira and disco.

Penn Station’s Half-Century was commissioned by the Empire State Development in partnership with the Public Art Fund. It is a series of nine panels created as murals to inaugurate the Moynihan Train Hall, the new expansion of New York City’s Pennsylvania Station. The prints in the exhibition came out of the mural project. Douglas points to moments of the station’s history: it was a location for the 1945 Vincente Minnelli film *The Clock*, starring Judy Garland and Robert Walker, as well as a site for showcasing the trimotor plane Amelia Earhart made famous. The station earned legendary status in the wartime imagination due to the hundreds of thousands of soldiers who said farewells to their loved ones there before departing for overseas duty. Douglas reflects on how architecture enmeshes itself into the lives of those who interact with it: “The station itself had as much of a profound effect on the psychogeography of New York City as it had on the physical one.”⁷ Such consideration is palpable in the photo series.

Notable is Douglas’ approach to narrative and the archive. Douglas resurrects the forgotten history of Penn Station by researching and embedding the real people who would have passed through it: musician Al Anderson, labour advocate and organizer Angelo Herndon, comic duo Flournoy Miller and Aubrey Lyles, and vaudeville entertainer Burt Williams, among others. These artists and performers that transited through Penn Station are all brought together—through Douglas’ digital image compositing—invoked from

beyond the grave into a flattened time and space not unlike limbo.

The artist has previously characterized his method as involving the creation of a “recombinant narrative.” Douglas is speaking to the act of recombining archival materials to make visible the relationships among history, subjective memory, personal experience, and the present. Interestingly, in a footnote of her essay “Venus in Two Acts,”⁸ Saidiya Hartman mentions credits Stan Douglas and NourbeSe Philip as having introduced her to the notion of “recombinant narrative.” Hartman considers it to be the act of “loop[ing] the strands of incommensurate accounts” and “weav[ing] present, past, and future.” By reenacting pasts and playing on the fine line separating unreal and fantastic, we are left with a question: what do these impossible stories tell us about our future?

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2. “Stan Douglas — Artist Talk,” Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, June 18, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/ArtGalleryNS/videos/757395058728506/>.

3. “Stan Douglas: Revealing Narratives — Audio Tour Transcript,” Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, <https://artgalleryofnovascotia.ca/sites/default/files/Stan%20Douglas-%20Revealing%20Narratives-%20Audio%20Tour%20Transcript%20.pdf>. The exhibition *The exhibition at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia* runs from June 18 to November 6, 2022.

4. “Stan Douglas: Revealing Narratives — Audio Tour Transcript.”

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6. Clare Davies and Nils Stelte, “Disco and the Angolan Civil War,” *The New Yorker*, March 21, 2012, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/disco-and-the-angolan-civil-war>.

7. “Stan Douglas: Revealing Narratives — Audio Tour Transcript.”

8. Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 12.