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Stan Douglas's performance of contested space in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside

This paper looks at the work of Stan Douglas, a Vancouver based artist working in film, video and photography. Its focus is Douglas's image *Every Building on 100 West Hastings* (2001), which was exhibited as a 66cm by 426.9cm C-Print (a C-print is the most common type of colour photograph). The image is a panorama in its most basic sense, a wide view of a physical space. It has an unusually large width to height ratio of roughly 58:9. However, whereas panoramas are usually taken from one point to capture a three hundred and sixty degree image of the space surrounding the photographer, Douglas's shot has a number of perspective points as it comprises of twenty-one separate photographs joined together.[1] He has perhaps utilised a horizontal dolly, similar to those used by film crews for tracking shots, in order to move the camera along the street while maintaining the same distance from his subject.

Every Building on 100 West Hastings (hereafter *Every Building*) is reproduced in a book of the same name, published by Vancouver's Contemporary Art Gallery and Arsenal Pulp Press.[2] Additionally, a larger reproduction is available in the Serpentine Gallery's publication *Journey into Fear*.[3] The image has been exhibited internationally as part of Douglas's *Journey into Fear* (2001) which comprises of a film installation and several other stills. *Every Building* has also featured in an exhibition on the 100 block of West Hastings Street titled *Picturing the Downtown Eastside.*

In this paper I intend to look at the image in both exhibition contexts and examine its specific and universal meanings. I am also concerned with the way that the artist impacts upon the community he represents. I argue that Douglas does not merely represent space in the Downtown Eastside, but is involved in the performance and production of space. I wonder if the Downtown Eastside, when photographed and used as a film-set, becomes what Lefebvre refers to as 'theatrical space, with its interplay

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[1] I have been advised that this is called a rolling panorama but have not been able to locate any further information on this term as yet.
[2] *Stan Douglas: Every Building on 100 West Hastings*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2002.
[3] *Journey into Fear* London: Serpentine Gallery, 2002.

between fictitious and real counterparts and its interaction between gazes and mirages.'[4] I have begun to examine this through Stan Douglas's *Every Building on West Hastings*.

But first, some background information about the Downtown Eastside. This neighbourhood was once the heart of commercial Vancouver but a shift occurred after the Second World War, perhaps exacerbated by the closure of the interurban street car line in 1954 and Woodward's department store in 1991. The neighbourhood declined and has in recent years achieved infamy as Canada's poorest urban postcode. City officials have effectively turned the Downtown Eastside into a containment zone for Vancouver's social ills—an open drug market, sex trade and epidemic levels of HIV and Hepatitis C by relaxing prosecution and concentrating services in the area. The neighbourhood has also become home to many of Vancouver's mentally ill since the de-institutionalisation of the mentally ill in the 1980s, as well as the homeless and increasingly the working classes who can no longer afford the rapidly ascending rents in other parts of the city.

Since there are few places left to develop in Vancouver, and as the Downtown Eastside is one of the oldest parts of the city, its heritage buildings are attracting interest from developers hoping to gentrify the troublesome neighbourhood, triggering concern about depleting stocks of affordable housing. The Woodward's building became a notable contested space after indecision over development left it empty for a decade. In September 2002, tension peaked as protesters took control of the building for ninety two days.

Every Building was taken before what became known as 'Woodsquat' occurred; however, it reflects the rising tensions regarding real estate in this neighbourhood. Douglas has stated that *Every Building* was taken from the perspective of Woodward's. The building's eleven year vacancy is projected on to the rest of the street, which is entirely empty of people and cars. Furthermore, there are no less than six 'For Sale' signs and one 'For Lease' sign on the block, implying that residents are fleeing. The 'For Lease' sign is located on the Dynamo Arts Association building, just right of centre, which also advertises a vacant artist's studio. As well as mirroring the emptiness of Woodward's, *Every Building* also mirrors the presence/absence of the artist. Artists are

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[4] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Blackwell, 1991, p. 188.

often implicated in the fate of downtown neighbourhoods. Martha Rosler suggests that 'because they share city spaces with the under-housed, they have been positioned as perpetrators and victims in the processes of displacement and urban planning.'[5]

In this case, the decline of the neighbourhood has led artists to move out. Though Douglas is present to create this image, his absence from the block the rest of the time is noteworthy. He has said in interview that at three times in his career he has worked from space on the one hundred block. [6] However, this is all in the past and thus the photograph performs the past and present, absence and presence of the artist.

Theorists of photography and performance studies might take issue with my suggestion that Douglas's work is a performance and I have to admit I used the term more instinctively than academically. I felt the word performance described Douglas's staging of *Every Building*, his enactment of an imagined version of the Downtown Eastside. Douglas is not a realist and his photographs do not show the street as it appears to others in the street. Rather, he is usually described as part of the younger generation of the Vancouver school of photoconceptualism.[7] Photoconceptualism emerged in the 1960s and had its heyday in the late 1970s and 1980s. The movement is usually understood as a challenge to the idea that photography cannot be detached from its referent. Photoconceptualism deliberately sought to create illusions because its proponents wanted to show 'a distrust of the image, a disidentification with being a photographer.'[8] Rather than claiming to document reality, then, the Vancouver school moved closer to practices of painters and sculptors in creating rather than attempting to capture an image. They considered themselves as artists who used photography rather than photographers.

A comparison of *Every Building* to Svend-Erik Eriksen's *Composite view of 100 West Hastings* (1973) illustrates the difference between realist photography and

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[5] Martha Rosler 'Fragments of a Metropolitan View' *If You Lived Here: The City in Art, Theory and Social Activism* edited by Brian Wallis. Dia Art Foundation, Discussions in Contemporary Culture Number 6. New York: The New Press, 1991, p. 31
[6] Stan Douglas 'Q&A: "My Work Reflects These Dark Times We Live In"
Interview with Stan Douglas' *Inter Press Service News Agency* http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=39887 2007.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Clint Burnham 'Fourteen Reasons for Photoconceptualism' *Unfinished Business: Photographing Vancouver Streets 1955-1985. West Coast Line 47* 39/2 edited by Bill Jeffries, Glen Lowry and Jerry Zaslove. West Coast Line and Presentation House Gallery, 2005 p. 102.

photoconceptualism.[9] Both Eriksen and Douglas combine a series of photographs in order to portray the same block, but Eriksen's black and white photograph is taken in daylight and shows people getting on with their everyday activities. *Every Building*, in contrast, is a night scene of resounding emptiness. The lighting effects bring out the colours of the buildings and signs and create an artificial glossiness. An eerie blue emanates from several of the buildings creating luminous puddles of light on the sidewalk.

According to Denise Blake Oleksijczuk, Douglas 'illuminated the street with the help of professionals using cinematic lighting.'[10] She writes that Douglas took the twenty-one photographs of *Every Building* (meticulously joined together with digital technology) on one night, August 27th – 28th 2001. Consequently, for that night, the actual inhabitants of the hundred block and anyone else wanting to pass through must have been excluded from the area while Douglas and his lighting team went to work, transforming the interior and exterior space of the block. This process parallels the actions of film crews using the Downtown Eastside as a backdrop, an occurrence that has become so common that Jeff Sommers and Nick Blomley suggest

> the local and international media—including television and film—never tire of Downtown Eastside scenes. So familiar and notorious has the neighbourhood become that Hollywood production crews are an almost constant presence in the area's back alleys. Many, if not the majority, of local residents may be economically and politically marginal. But if this place is an isolated ghetto, it must be the most accessible and well-known one in history. [11]

Though this is perhaps an exaggeration, Sommers and Blomley rightly draw attention to the resounding paradox of the Downtown Eastside; it is a community represented in inverse proportion to its wealth. As well as representing Downtown Eastside space, filmmakers and artists also intervene in it, often disrupting its everyday use by residents.

Every Building strikes me as a performance which enacts the eviction of Downtown Eastside residents as developers move in, and begs the same questions: were

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[9] This photo is located in *Every Building on 100 West Hastings* Reid Shier, ed., pp. 36-37 More of Erik Eriksens photographs of Hastings Street can be found in *Unfinished Business: Photographing Vancouver Streets 1955-1985. West Coast Line 47* 39/2 edited by Bill Jeffries, Glen Lowry and Jerry Zaslove. West Coast Line and Presentation House Gallery, 2005.

[10] Denise Blake Oleksijczuk 'Haunted Spaces' from *Stan Douglas: Every Building on 100 West Hastings*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2002. p. 105

[11] Jeff Sommers and Nick Blomley, 'The Worst Block in Vancouver' *Stan Douglas: Every Building on 100 West Hastings*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2002, p. 29.

the residents compensated for the disruption? Were they re-housed somewhere comfortable? Or is it the lives of the poor and disempowered who once again suffer at the hands of the rich and powerful? Whilst Douglas perhaps created the effect of emptiness as a critique of past, present and future displacement in the Downtown Eastside, the method of production exposes an ethical dilemma in the relationship between the artist and subject, the powerful and the marginalised, which is more usually found in documentary photographs that represent people rather than places.

Oleksijczuk suggests that by '*not* representing the poor and indigent' the photographer refuses 'to allow viewers the easy satisfaction of feeling pity, or worse, of being comforted by the fact that they themselves are much better off.'[12] However, there is a possibility that this lack of representation permits viewers to participate in what might be an even worse crime, that of ignoring the people who inhabit the Downtown Eastside, of hoping that the magical act conjured by Douglas can be repeated, and Downtown Eastside residents will conveniently disappear.

In enacting the emptiness of the Downtown Eastside, I propose that Douglas is drawing critical attention to the methods of city planners and developers who take some responsibility for urban decline and renewal. As maps were a tool for the colonial displacement of indigenous people, the aerial photograph functions similarly for the urban planner, enabling the drawing of red lines around neighbourhoods, arbitrarily deciding what must be destroyed and what must be replaced with little attention to the people who live in these locations. Aerial photographs are from such a height that people cannot be made out.

While *Every Building* is taken at street level, the lack of people reflects their unimportance in the eyes of the planner. Michel de Certeau suggests an aerial view is 'a way of keeping aloof, by the space planner, urbanist, city planner or cartographer. The panorama-city is a "theoretical" (that is, visual) simulacrum, in short a picture, whose condition of possibility is an oblivion and a misunderstanding of practices.'[13] The failure of photography to represent citizens and their interests is highlighted by Douglas's image read in the light of de Certeau.

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[12] Oleksijczuk, p. 110.
[13] Michel de Certeau *The Practice of Everyday Life* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984 pp. 92-93.

Looking at *Every Building* in the context of *Journey into Fear* informs us of Douglas's concerns with the production of space in a global context. He links urban decline and redevelopment to the global restructuring of late twentieth-century capitalism. *Journey into Fear* features original scenes written by Stan Douglas and Vancouver writer Michael Turner played on a loop in varying order. The title and content echoes that of the feature film *Journey into Fear* (Norman Foster, 1943) and its 1975 remake of the same name by Daniel Mann.

Douglas's film, like the texts he references, is set on board a ship, in this case a container ship headed for Vancouver. Following Mann and Foster's films, his protagonists are named Graham and Möller. In both the 1975 film and Douglas's take on it, Möller is trying to persuade Graham to delay the arrival of the ship because his unnamed clients stand to gain economically. Douglas points out the significance of the date of Daniel Mann's *Journey into Fear* because it 'roughly marks, a halfway point in the transition from internationalism to globalism: the passage from a world in which power is brokered by politics to one in which finance is the preferred medium of influence.' The film was set during the 1973 oil crisis which Douglas writes 'abruptly set the stage for the global dominance of financial markets.'[14]

Journey into Fear thus places *Every Building* into a context of globalisation. Vancouver's position as a port is highlighted by *Journey into Fear*, and the accompanying stills of damaged containers and impounded fishing boats emphasise that in the age of globalisation traditional industries have declined leading to unemployment. The Downtown Eastside was once the home to many workers in the waterfront industries. I quote Sommers and Blomley, 'The restructuring of the waterfront-hinterland industrial linkages propelled the ebbing of the subculture that had formed around it. Increasingly, this neighbourhood was no longer identified through work but rather the morally dubious nature of other activities that took place in the area such as gambling, and especially drinking.'[15] The street we see in *Every Building* shows a historical continuation of this problem: a number of pawn shops are signs of poverty and drug culture that has emerged in recent years in place of an industrial work base.

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[14] Douglas, Stan. 'Journey into Fear (2001)' *Journey into Fear*. London, Serpentine Gallery, 2002, p. 136.
[15] Sommers and Blomley, p. 33.

Moreover, Douglas's staging of *Every Building* links it to the performances that feature in his film loop and to the distrust of the image evoked by photoconceptualism. Achim Borchardt Hume has pointed out that the dialogue of Douglas's film 'is only briefly in synch with the actors' lip movement.'[16] This and the mixing and looping of scenes prevent the viewer from becoming complacent and accepting film as authoritative. Additionally, stills of the production set are part of the exhibition, reemphasising the constructed nature of the work. Douglas's cinematic lighting of the one hundred block turns the street scene into a film-set. In doing this, he draws attention to the changing nature of Vancouver's economy. Once fuelled by resource industries and port activities, the city increasingly relies on the symbolic economy. It markets its space for the creation of illusions—films that pretend to be Vancouver but aren't, or that postulate an image of reality which should not be trusted. It is significant that Mann's 1975 remake of *Journey into Fear* was, according to Douglas, 'one of the first major motion pictures to be shot by a local company and crew' in Vancouver.[17]

Also, I have discovered that the Eriksen photograph of the hundred block, although taken in a realist style, was intended as the backdrop for a National Film Board animation that was never made.[18] *Every Building* also references Ed Ruscha's *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* and despite this famous photograph of the Hollywood location, Ruscha similarly refused the label photographer. It seems that Douglas's intertextuality invokes images that are tied up with the performance and illusions of the film industry. It might also be said that the cinematic treatment of the West 100 Hundred block critiques a North American trend to glamorise the ghetto through popular culture. Alternatively, it might be a comment on how many documentary photographers have aestheticised poverty. After all, without looking too closely at the shabby shop fronts in *Every Building*, the heritage fronts on this tree lined avenue are an appealing urban scene. Douglas's lighting brings the street a perhaps misleading vibrancy.

The particular exhibition space of Douglas's works contributes to the meaning they hold for the viewer. Exhibited internationally, Douglas's work appeals to universal

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[16] Achim Borchardt Hume 'An Introduction' *Journey into Fear*. London, Serpentine Gallery, 2002., p. 9.
[17] Douglas, 2002 p. 135.
[18] Bill Jeffries 'The Shock of the Old—the Street Photograph in Vancouver' *Unfinished Business: Photographing Vancouver Streets 1955-1985. West Coast Line 47* 39/2 edited by Bill Jeffries, Glen Lowry and Jerry Zaslove. West Coast Line and Presentation House Gallery, 2005.

concerns. He has suggested that 100 West Hastings is representative of blocks in most North American cities that act as a 'buffer block between a gentrified neighbourhood and one that is not.'[19] He compares it with the situation of urban decline in Detroit—the subject of his 1999 film installation and collection of stills called *Le Detroit*.

Exhibiting in a local context, the artist performs a more complex role—his representations and use of contested urban space have a direct impact on those spaces and the people who inhabit them. In 2005, *Every Building* was exhibited as part of the *Picturing the Downtown Eastside* exhibition, held at 112 West Hastings. This exhibition featured photographic, video, film and performance art addressing the Downtown Eastside. In a review of the event, Robin Lawrence relates an anecdote about a 'ragged street person' taking 'a long and ample piss' whilst 'art-world visitors' gathered on the sidewalk to view one exhibit.

This anecdote illustrates the problems encountered when representing a marginalized community within that community and elsewhere. [20] Whose space is the Downtown Eastside? Who gets to use this space or decide how it should be used? How can 'art world visitors' seek a harmonious, unexploitative and productive relationship with 'ragged street people?' The decision to use part of the old Woodward's site for Simon Fraser University's School for contemporary arts means that these questions will become increasingly important.

Picturing the Downtown Eastside was the first exhibition of *Every Building* in this neighborhood, after traveling to galleries in New York, Barcelona and London with *Journey into Fear*. The artist's absence/presence in the past and present is again highlighted, as is the tension of an international artist intervening in a local situation. Douglas's participation in *Picturing the Downtown Eastside* suggests he wants to be involved in negotiations over space in the Downtown Eastside. The recent news that Douglas will provide a mural for the main public space of the Woodward's redevelopment project which will depict, to quote architecture critic Helena Grdadolnik, the 'area's living history,' implicates the artist in whatever consequences the

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[19] Douglas, 2007.
[20] Laurence, Robin. 'Picturing the Downtown Eastside' *The Georgia Straight* May 12th 2005. http://www.straight.com/article/picturing-the-downtown-eastside

development of Woodward's will have for the neighbourhood.[21] Douglas faces the difficult task of representing the history of place and negotiating an ethical use of space in a much disputed location. In conclusion, Douglas is an artist who represents the space of the Downtown Eastside, but in creating these representations converts urban space into theatrical space. His work offers a telling example of how artists influence the production of urban space through representation, performance and exhibition.

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[21] Grdadolnik, Helena 'Woodward's Takes Shape: 'Nothing like it in North America'' *The Tyee* March 30, 2006 http://thetyee.ca/Views/2006/03/30/WoodwardsTakesShape/
Grdadolnik champions Woodwards as an exemplary cooperative process between community and developers. The development was blocked for many years because residents weren't happy with previous developer's plans, but the current Henriquez plan incorporates 200 non-market housing units (to 536 market units) and is thus considered a healthy compromise between market interests and the interests of the community. However, others remain concerned that this is primarily a commercial enterprise and will not be the democratic space it projects itself as. The selling out of market units in less than a day underscores the likelihood of increasing gentrification of the Downtown Eastside in the future.