

Social work practices of art

Stan Douglas, *Nu•tka•*: A collage

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1. A view from the catalogue

Stepping out of the catalogue starting from text an authoritative voice where do I start if not from text? A text as a map orienting the reader I hold on to it on the way to the projection room before letting go

Stan Douglas' *Nu•tka•* (1996) is a video installation in which two distinct images are interlaced on the same screen – weaving one image track, visible on the even raster lines of a video projection with another, presented on odd raster lines. These video tracks are played from disc, continually looping, with a quadraphonic soundtrack: two disembodied voices that drift around the exhibition space as they recount distinct narratives, which, like the images, are woven into one another, sometimes speaking simultaneously and sometimes in exact synchronization.

The work is set in the late eighteenth century at Nootka Sound, with conflicting tales told by the Commandant of Yuquot's first Spanish occupation, José Estéban Martínez, and by his captor, the English captain James Colnett – each of whom believed he had the right to claim land already occupied by a peculiarly 'absent' third party, Chief Maquinna and the people of the Mowachaht Confederacy. In monologues derived from historical documents and their personal journals, the delirious Englishman alternates between recollection of his capture and the fantasy of escape, while the Spanish commander betrays signs of paranoia as he becomes increasingly uncertain of his ability to dominate the region.

The two image tracks were shot on 35mm film in two continuous takes from a vantage point on San Miguel Island, the original Spanish defensive site at Yuquot. The interlaced images are mostly in continual motion, panning and tilting, presenting various features of Nootka Sound – but they briefly come to rest, and into exact registration, on six occasions. At these moments, the uncanny apparition of a landscape subject to conflicting winds and opposing tides is seen. Concurrently, one hears Colnett and Martínez describing their respective delusions in exact synchronization with exactly the same words (excerpts from Gothic and colonial literatures of Edgar Allan Poe, Cervantes, Jonathan Swift, Captain James Cook and the Marquis de Sade). As the narrators go their separate ways – recounting their contempt for one another and inability to endure the situation in which they find themselves – the interlaced image pulls apart also. Outside of the six synchronous moments, the narratives, like images, are blurred, doubled and at the limit of legibility, sublime."¹

As I walk in I let the text go As I leave I pick it up again it has become a residue of my visit a material trace I wish to keep along with the sensations



Nu•tka•, 1996, Video installation (stills)

2. Stepping into the space of the exhibit

Stepping into a dark room, leaving behind the white walls of the rest of the gallery, crossing a threshold into a large room that is pitch black where the video projection takes up the entire back wall, facing me. Some figures seem to be sitting a few feet away, on some kind of seats, in a single row, or in two short rows at the most, and the rest is an open space. A modified space.

What kinds of spaces of encounter and of knowledge do we create in setting up spaces in social work education? Do we also experiment with contrastive conditions and variable spaces of knowledge? This dark room reminds me that we sometimes cross thresholds and are in the dark as we do. In some forms of research, we let ourselves be destabilized, somewhat.

Onto the back wall I see projected : the West coast of Vancouver island in a haze, in blues, super blues, (blue filter), the haze evokes a dream, so it is not about the real coast line - it is

about the dream that this coast line represents – and it is also about this particular coast line. The image is very wide, as if limitless – open possibilities, and stunningly beautiful, a dream of pure beauty.

Art has no trouble speaking simultaneously to the real and to the imagination, the fantasy, the wishes, the troubled wishes.

It is a moving picture, as the gaze scans the coast line, or as if travelling from a boat, with a moving view of that dream coastline. As a spectator, you are mesmerized, enchanted. You want to stay, here, now, not go away, not go back. Which is what these sailors, newcomers, colonizers, tradespeople experienced, the wish and the determination to stay.

Art shows you that – a complicated set of feelings, thoughts and actions.

A view from the sea, onto rocks, onto water, and trees. A literal point of view onto sea and land, a particular horizon, a perspective.



The picture moves across the screen, it is blurred for long periods and then it stabilizes on a group of rocks, on the edge of a crique or a bay. It is not a single image blurring and stabilizing – as reality does, blur and stability -- but instead, two images, two films, two views simultaneously projected onto the screen, in alternating lines, (even and odd rafters). They blur into one another, as they encounter one another.

At certain moments, that are far apart, during six moments precisely, the moving images sit still. Stop, rest, pause together to form a single view.

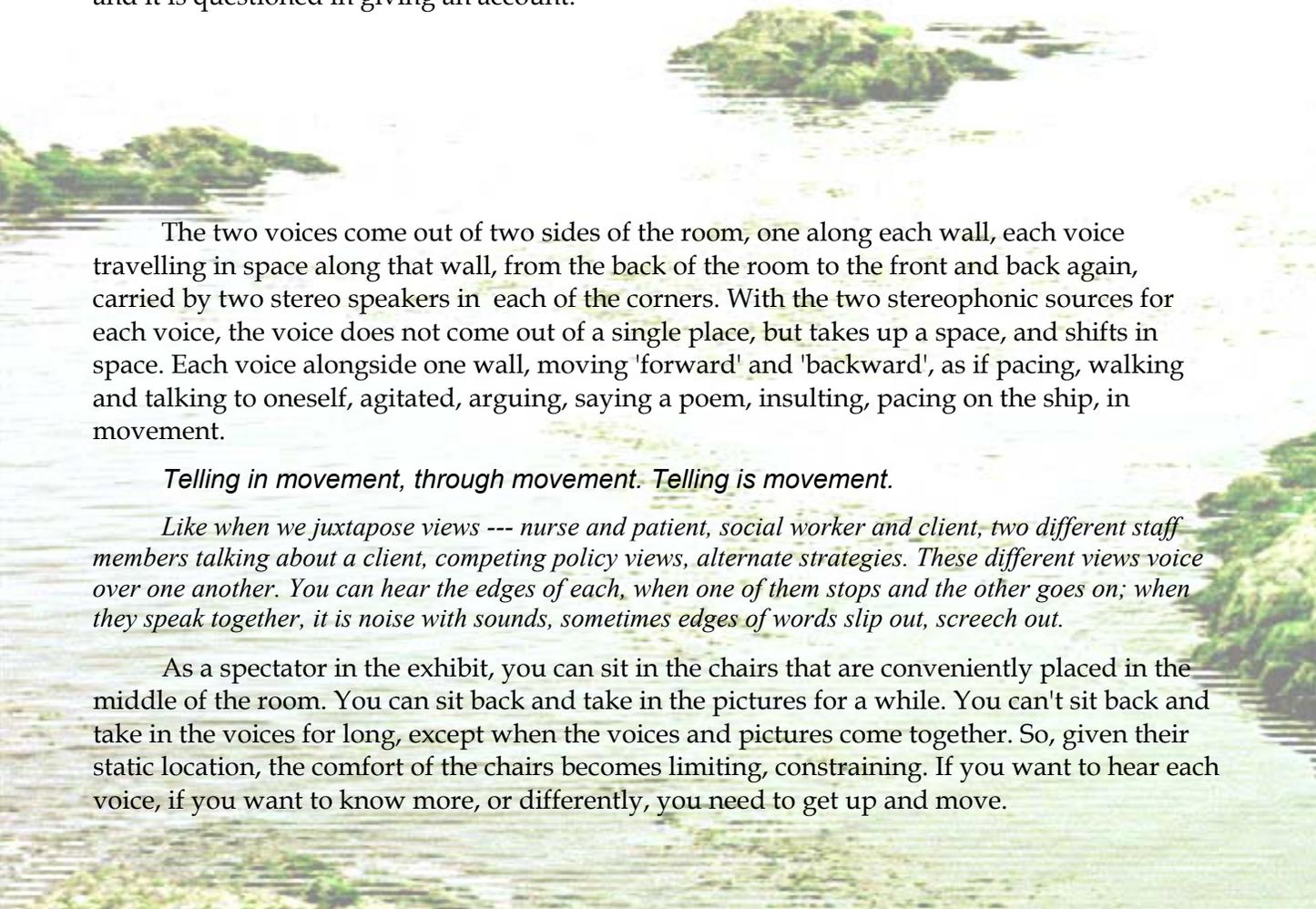
Can viewpoints be layered, do viewpoints collide, converge?

Along with the images, the voices meet and join at these very same points/nodes, tiny moments of calm, You breathe differently. These are not the predominant mode, but a

harmonious coming together, extraordinary and fragile. And they start moving again, pulling away from each other, images and sounds. Until the next time.

Even the stilled image is fuzzy. Technically, they are two images taken from different angles, superimposed onto one another, not fully coinciding. They come together in an unstable way, with 'small noise', a trembling image.

And you hear the separate voices and words of two men. The voices blur as well, speaking side by side, regardless, in spite of one another. Hard to tell what they are saying, the two voices speak in English, one with a British accent, the other with a different accent. Or, depending on which you pay attention to, out of familiarity or privilege, we could say: one with a Spanish accent, the other with a British accent. The stability of that sequence is non-existent, and it is questioned in giving an account.



The two voices come out of two sides of the room, one along each wall, each voice travelling in space along that wall, from the back of the room to the front and back again, carried by two stereo speakers in each of the corners. With the two stereophonic sources for each voice, the voice does not come out of a single place, but takes up a space, and shifts in space. Each voice alongside one wall, moving 'forward' and 'backward', as if pacing, walking and talking to oneself, agitated, arguing, saying a poem, insulting, pacing on the ship, in movement.

Telling in movement, through movement. Telling is movement.

Like when we juxtapose views --- nurse and patient, social worker and client, two different staff members talking about a client, competing policy views, alternate strategies. These different views voice over one another. You can hear the edges of each, when one of them stops and the other goes on; when they speak together, it is noise with sounds, sometimes edges of words slip out, screech out.

As a spectator in the exhibit, you can sit in the chairs that are conveniently placed in the middle of the room. You can sit back and take in the pictures for a while. You can't sit back and take in the voices for long, except when the voices and pictures come together. So, given their static location, the comfort of the chairs becomes limiting, constraining. If you want to hear each voice, if you want to know more, or differently, you need to get up and move.

Is the middle a neutral place? Or a wished for neutral place? You can stay in the middle – and be fair to both sides – but then you can't make sense of much, except that, which is a powerful message: by being in the middle, the voices voiceover one another, and reality is a blur.

Moving from behind the desk, moving outward. Moving towards knowledge, 'what do I want to know', what do I not want to know? What am I moving away from?

As spectator and audience, I can change locations, and move about in that dark room to see the coast line from different angles, and move as the film moves, pacing, slowly, fast, in relation to the movement on the screen, in sync or off-sync. Mostly, you can now move in and out of the sound space of each voice. Your understanding will be different. Standing on one side of the room, closer to one of the walls, you can hear one voice, the other is impossible now to capture. On the other side, you now make sense of a different position. You begin to feel torn, which one to track, which one to follow? Do you have a preference? Your wish, your preference is translated immediately in the way you move in the room. What and whom you turn to. Your own position(s), as haphazard and momentaneous as it/they may be, becomes more legible, including to yourself.

Our interpretations, our emphases of some of the 'data, of a particular knowledge' become embodied, explicit. Something which in our practices, often remains implicit and unquestioned.

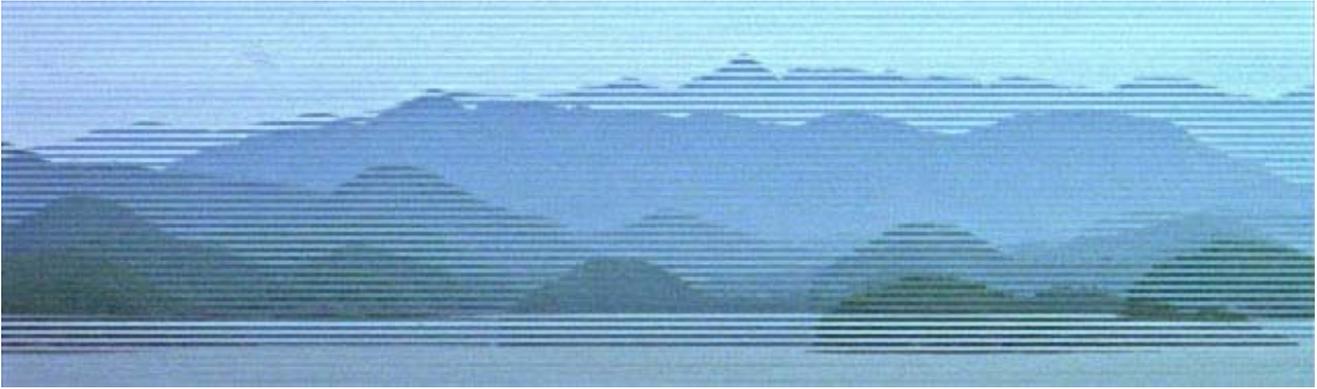
Once you have moved towards and heard each voice, you can try to 'hold' on to something of each, a fluttering presence, modulating the distance between them, a bit closer to one, a bit further from the other, shifting distance and proximity.

In this story, the characters are located in a very specific historical period, at the time of 'first contact' of the colonial conquest. The English and the Spanish came to conquer the West coast and each people claimed it as their own. In the precise historical moment that the exhibit refers to, the English captain has been captured by the Spanish captain. As they wait for reinforcements to join them from their respective fleets, they express their hopes and their fears in distinct voices. They come to rest at times. Looking from the sea onto the land.

And as you now look from the land onto the sea, from that position of looking outward, it becomes more and more evident that one voice is, glaringly, missing. The voice missing is the voice that was there, that is near, the Native voice. That absence becomes increasingly present through its un-statement in the story. The film has made indications of a powerful presence with a muted viewpoint. If we wish to notice.

As we know from practice, from reading past case files or present-day case records, and from working with groups, the blanks tell the other side of the story. What is missing is as much present as what is told. What is missing is another way of telling. The missing link, the silence of the missing voice grows on you. That voice does not see the space and the encounters from the same angle.

This is not a history of the past for past's sake, or of the past versus the present. It is a history of a past for the present. It captures layers of past/present understandings, accumulated assumptions and changes.



3. Conversations

"Casting doubt" ²

For social work. In different ways. Narratives that take as their material the habitual stuff of life, that start with what is around us. Narratives that start from the here and now – at the moment of the encounter in the present, as we are – and that start pulling thread after thread, unravelling. A tension appears between what we think we know and what we don't quite know. Movements between recovering, uncovering. A disquieting quest. Ordinary and unusual.

Everything the work says, it says by means of representation.

*Pictures words, sounds—
my work relies on means that you must mistrust because so many traces of power
and oppression are stored away in them and their history, the history of their
exploitation.*

This is a fundamental irony about my--and any--artistic work³

The quest opens up sidelines, other tracks. The other side, tensions, beauty and tensions, and multiple versions.

When these versions come together, there is no finite overlap or neat resolution. They do not fit onto one another: gaps appear, edges collide, their seams show

In terms of a general technique all the work has this idea of suspension, like taking something that is transient, something temporal, and suspending it in some way.

With a film loop for instance [...] I'm always looking for this nexus point, the middle point of some kind of transformation⁴

Layered work

From where we stand, the past seeps into the present. Layers of history, layers of seeing, moves of engagement. The past seems different, and so does the present.

Grounded in the specifics of place, he searches out the many histories of a particular location and seizes upon the defining moments of a city or a neighborhood. But then he goes beyond the social and political into the cultural realm... to distil their social and historical messages.⁵



Gold River Mill, 1996

Traces

Retrieving situations, gestures and words: the work of the practitioner, the artist

Prior to making Nutka, I was surveying the area, finding traces of human presence in the landscape, and out of this came the Nootka Sound series of photographs.

The typical conception of this kind of terrain is that it's untouched by culture, but anyone who has grown up in the Pacific Northwest knows that all those trees are at least second growth. You see that immediately.

*In addition to a hundred years of industry, there's the Spanish presence in the well, and in the midden they made a ceremonial parade ground, or Mowachaht and Muchalaht fish traps, town sites and pictographs which might be as much as three thousand years old.*⁶

The Spanish Well at
Yoquot, 1996



Hummingbird/Cormorant
at Hanna Channel, 1996

As beautiful and remote as the natural landscape appears, there are marks left on the terrain made by industry, by clear cutting of the rain forest, by paper mills, by housing, by employment, by abandonment, and earlier markings.

An appreciation of 'nature' in art must either negotiate or suppress the social and industrial conflicts that animate this part of the world.

The tourist views of wilderness scenes, promoted from the beginning of European settlement, serve as deeds of psychic ownership to counter the previous contestation of the land.⁷

Archives: Personal documents and fiction

Constituting files: What the characters speak is taken from historical archives, their monologues from letters and personal journals.

Incarcerated, the delirious Captain Colnett alternates between recollections of his capture and the fantasy of escape, while Commandant Martinez [of Yuquot's first Spanish occupation] [...] becomes increasingly uncertain of his ability to dominate the region.⁸

[They] project their anxieties unto the unfamiliar surroundings [...] ruminations, doubt and thwarted ambitions.⁹

The historical documents are mixed in with literary writings that are from approximately the same period and that resonate with a similar genre.

Nutka as a Canadian Gothic

*The Gothic romance was typically characterized by a return of the repressed: some past transgression haunts, then destroys the culpable person, family or social order – Edgar Allen Poe, Swift, Cook, Sade and Cervantes.*¹⁰

*It is no surprise that these narratives flourished during the era of high imperialism [a time of] contact and mingling with radically foreign cultures.*¹¹

In Nutka, the picture is of an atmosphere of suspicion, and impending calamity in a gloomy, forbidding and haunted land¹²

Poe describing the landscape in the Fall of the House of Usher:

*"During the whole of the dull, dark and soundless day..."*¹³

Culture genre, as a mode of representation gives access to forms of knowledge:

*When they become obsolete, forms of communication become an index of an understanding of the world lost to us*¹⁴

Part of that knowledge is what is left unstated,

Absence is often the focus of my work. Even if I am resurrecting these obsolete forms of representation, I'm always indicating their inability to represent the real subject of the work. It's always something that is outside the system.

*The hugest absence in Nutka is the natives. They were the trading partners, they were the people who were residing on the land.*¹⁵



Closed or open readings

What are we to make of such readings? It could have been, or could be, otherwise

We can think about your work as history, a narrative and an apparatus that is creating a closed system which, because of the tightness of it, splits open and allows some moment of grace, or of freedom.

You talk about each work using a different conception of the medium, or a different genre. But in every instance you talk about a very specific moment, where something is desired, or some idea of utopia is forcing a desire for freedom onto its subject, or its subject is seeking that.¹⁶

Almost all of my works, especially the ones that look at specific historical events, address moments when history could have gone one way or another

We live in the residue of such moments, and for better or worse, their potential is not yet spent¹⁷

Acknowledgments

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 - ¹⁰ Stan Douglas, Nu•tka. Historical background. In Vancouver Art Gallery, p. 43.
 - ¹¹ Stan Douglas, *ibid*.
 - ¹² Scott Watson, p. 65.
 - ¹³ Conversation with Diana Thater, Phaidon Press, p. 15.
 - ¹⁴ Conversation with Diana Thater, *ibid*, p. 9.
 - ¹⁵ *ibid*, p. 16.
 - ¹⁶ *ibid*, p. 28.
 - ¹⁷ *ibid*, p. 29.
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