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Politics of Disconnection
On the Usages of Formats in Some Works by
Stan Douglas

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Stan Douglas's *Monodramas* (1991) were conceived as interruptions to the flow of television programing. Inserted into commercial breaks during the night hours on BCTV, the British Columbia television station—as a break within a break so to speak—they lasted thirty to sixty seconds and were broadcast without announcement (ｆｉｇ.１). They remained disconnected from the program, because they could not be classified as belonging to the category of advertising. In narrative miniatures, the videos show inconsequential moments, moments of misrecognition and malfunction in everyday situations. People fail to connect with each other, driving, walking, talking past each other. A man greets another man on the street as if he knows him, "Hi, Gary!" And, when passing by, he habitually adds, "How are you doing?" The other man replies, "I'm not Gary." Then the video ends.

Erwin Panofsky considered the greeting between men as a prime example of the cultural-historical frames in which this gesture becomes intelligible. Lifting a hat to greet someone as "a residue of medieval chivalry" is "peculiar to the western world," and therefore not understandable for "an Australian bushman" who is unfamiliar with this habit. (1) To the Western observer, however, lifting a hat conveys manifold meanings, revealing that the acquaintance is "a man of the twentieth century" conditioned "by his national, social and educational background, by the previous history of his life and by his present surroundings." (2) The greeting, thus, also figures as a mutual understanding of belonging to a specific cultural and social community, and at the same time as a separation from others who, as the "Australian bushman," are excluded from it. Where the greeting, as in Stan Douglas's *Monodrama*, is not returned, it is precisely this shared horizon of social experience and belonging that is called into question. What seems significant here is that the man greeted is of color, his unanswering a rejection of being habitually misrecognized within a social order of domination.

Panofsky conceived iconology as an elaborate method of interpretation through which a plain gesture such as lifting a hat takes on rich symbolic values that "reveal the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion." (3) Bourdieu, who in his afterword to Panofsky's study on *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism* had engaged with the notion of habitus expressed in common thought and practice, (4) aligned such a gesture with acts of submission to symbolic violence. By, let's say, lifting a hat, one does not only form an idea but submits to a "tacit and practical belief made

(1)
Erwin Panofsky, "Introductory," in *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (Boulder, CO and Oxford: Westview Press, [1939] 1972), 3–17, here 4.

(2)
Panofsky, "Introductory," 4.

(3)
Panofsky, "Introductory," 7.

(4)
See Pierre Bourdieu, "Postface," to Erwin Panofsky, *Architecture gothique et pensée scolastique*, trans. Pierre Bourdieu (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1967), 133–67. On "habitus," see Pierre Bourdieu, *Habitus and Field*, General Sociology, vol. 2: *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1982–83*, trans. Peter Collier (Cambridge and Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2020).

possible by the habituation which arises from the training of the body."(5) In this context, Bourdieu only briefly introduces the notion of "countertraining," a repeated bodily exercise in order to transform habitus. (6) However, as the history of photography and film has shown, acts of symbolic violence, of social inclusion and exclusion not only occur in bodily expressions and their pictorial representations, but also in the infrastructures of picture making, where they remain inaccessible to even the most trained eye. Much has been written about the technological racism of color photography and the photochemical privileging of white skin, for which Kodak's Shirley posed on the test cards for calibrating cameras and printers. (7) This white standard was also inscribed in the history of color television. Regarding the North American color system NTSC, Jonathan Sterne and Dylan Mulvin note that this format was not only based on a set of assumptions about human perception borrowed from 19th-century psychophysics, but that it also corresponded with the ideological design of a televisual norm culture. (8) Unlike Kodachrome, NTSC was equally unsatisfactory at reproducing light and dark skin tones, earning it a reputation as an acronym for "No True Skin Color,"(9) but it was no less concerned with establishing whiteness as the norm. The color slides that Eastman Kodak provided for the technical tests of NTSC, were "remarkable for their depictions of idealized middle-class life and whiteness in the 1950s: a young woman holding a kitten; another smiling from behind a net; boys canoeing and playing tug-of-war; potted flowers with a dark background. Their subjects evidence the connection between the technical ambitions behind advances in televisual representation and what Michael Schudson would later call the "'capitalist realism' of advertising."(10) Ideas of a cultural and social norm informed the development of technical standards for color television that determined what was represented and what was misrepresented before any program content. Thereby, the process of technical standardization and perceptual engineering already prefigured the future television program and its viewers, envisioning the commercial leisure culture of a white society that would feature in the commercial breaks.

The habitualized forms of communication, which the *Monodramas* stage, thus correspond with the technical standards of formats that regulate the understanding of the television program's content. (11) Douglas's *Monodramas* aim to disrupt these correspondences, to the extent that Madeleine Akrich has spoken of the "de-scription" of social relations shaped by technology. Like a "script" or a "scenario," she notes, certain ideas about the world—"specific tastes, competences, motives, aspirations, political prejudices and the rest"(12)—are inscribed in technical objects and their usage, by which they "measure behavior, place it in a hierarchy, control it, express the fact of submission, and distribute causal stories and sanctions."(13) Where these scripts are disregarded or disputed, new ways of using technologies, of building social relations and generating knowledge may emerge. The notion of "de-scription" is particularly helpful to broaden an understanding of habits to include the usages of media technologies, be it in compliance with or against the grains of their protocols. Technical standards and formats, such as the thousands overseen by the International Organization of Standards (ISO) and deployed for the transmission and compression of

(5)
Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge and Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2000), 172.

(6)
Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 172.

(7)
For further discussion on this topic, see Lorna Roth, "Looking at Shirley, the Ultimate Norm: Colour Balance, Image Technologies, and Cognitive Equity," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 34, no. 1 (2009): 111–36; Tanya Sheehan, "Color Matters: Rethinking Photography and Race," in *The Colors of Photography*, ed. Bettina Gockel (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2020), 55–71.

(8)
Jonathan Sterne and Dylan Mulvin, "The Low Acuity for Blue: Perceptual Technics and American Color Television," *Journal of Visual Culture* 13, no. 2 (2014): 118–38, here 126–7, https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412914529.

(9)
See, e.g., Susan Murray, "Never Twice the Same Colour: Standardizing, Calibrating and Harmonizing NTSC Colour Television in the Early 1950s," *Screen* 56, no. 4 (Winter 2015): 415–35, here 421.

(10)
Sterne and Mulvin, "The Low Acuity for Blue," 127. For a more detailed discussion of the test images, see Dylan Mulvin and Jonathan Sterne, "Scenes from an Imaginary Country: Test Images and the American Color Television Standard," *Television & New Media* 17, no. 1 (2016): 21–43. For the reference to Michael Schudson see the chapter "Advertising as Capitalist Realism," in *Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion: Its Dubious Impact on American Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 209–33.

(11)
Similarly, Benoît Turquety has claimed that "formats in fact constitute a rather rigid geopolitical structure that connects perceptual aspects with a complex system of global media currents and cultural hierarchies." Benoît Turquety, *Medium, Format, Configuration: The Displacements of Film* (Lüneburg: meson press, 2019), 23.

information, figure prominently here; as Keller Easterling has put it in his study on infrastructure, they are particularly successful "in shaping global habits" through the "rehearsal of protocols that join the bargains and offsets of contemporary global governance."(14)

Aired on television, Douglas's *Monodramas* operate within the institutional infrastructure of broadcasting. For this purpose, Douglas did not intend to show them in art's sanctuary space of the galleries that he considered only useful because they gave his artistic project institutional legitimacy: "I use the galleries mostly for the convenience of having access to the letterhead, which makes getting access to the airwaves much easier; institutions like talking to other institutions. But I'm interested in the reaction of people who don't specifically set out to see them."(15) However, neither are these institutional infrastructures as such made visible, nor are their modes of operation revealed with the gesture of critical distancing. Illuminating in this context is a conversation between Cory Arcangel and Dara Birnbaum, published in *Artforum*, about the critical practices of their respective generations of artists. (16) While Dara Birnbaum claims for her works to make visible the "hidden agenda" (17) of what is really said on television, Cory Arcangel rejects this claim for his works. Instead, he is concerned with producing "incredibly elaborate demonstrations of technology" (18) that are indistinguishable in their aesthetic result from all the other images circulating in the data stream of the Internet. Tim Griffin, who refers to this conversation in an essay for *October*, derives from it an understanding of compression as an artistic process *after* criticism. (19) Under the conditions of compression, art can no longer refer to a standpoint outside of those structures from which a critique of them can be articulated. Rather, it is dependent on these structures themselves, embedded in them to the point of indistinguishability. Yet it is precisely this indistinguishability that enables art to simultaneously operate invisibly within the structures and interrupt them:

> By definition, it [compression] is an operation that hides itself in the open; and the would-be critic easily takes the image at hand at face value, discussing it for how it appears, rather than considering the mechanisms inscribed within it—or, as significantly, the sensibility with which it is employed. And, as we can see, the compression model may be deployed for numerous and divergent ends. Such elusiveness in means is perhaps the predominant character of artistic discourse and production today. (20)

It is this sense of a discrete operating in communication infrastructures that Douglas's works are interested in moments of breakdown. (21) The televised *Monodramas* share this interest with more recent digital works by Stan Douglas. The *DCT* series (2016–) is comprised of large-scale paintings: square panels primed with gesso and printed with UV ink that display abstract color fields (f i g s . 2–3). Brightly colored as well as black-and-white schemes blend into visually unstable patterns. Geometric forms seemingly dissolve into one another, alternately stepping forward and backward, rearranging themselves kaleidoscopically. Blurs make these patterns appear amorphous and undefined, as if our optical perceptual apparatus were creating this effect in a failure of accommodation. Stan Douglas has described his series as an exploration of the "non-identity" (22) of

(12)
Madeleine Akrich, "The De-Scription of Technical Objects," in *Shaping Technology / Building Society: Studies in Sociotechnical Change*, ed. Wiebe E. Bijker and John Law (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1997), 206–24, here 208.

(13)
Akrich, "The De-Scription of Technical Objects," 216.

(14)
Keller Easterling, *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure* (New York: Verso, 2014), 18.

(15)
Stan Douglas in Chris Dafoe, "Visual non sequiturs intrude in the mindlessness of TV," *The Globe and Mail*, January 30, 1992 cited in Noam M. Elcott, "In Search of Lost Space: Stan Douglas's Archaeology of Cinematic Darkness," *October* 139 (Winter 2012): 151–82, here 166.

(16)
Cory Arcangel and Dara Birnbaum in conversation, "Do It 2," *Artforum* 47, no. 7 (March 2009): 190–99.

(17)
Arcangel and Birnbaum, "Do It 2," 193.

(18)
Arcangel and Birnbaum, "Do It 2," 194.

(19)
Tim Griffin, "Compression," *October* 135 (Winter 2011): 3–20, here 18.

(20)
Griffin, "Compression," 20. In a similar vein, Hito Steyerl has spoken about the ambivalence of poor images: "The circulation of poor images feeds into both capitalist media assembly lines and alternative audiovisual economies. In addition to a lot of confusion and stupefaction, it also possibly creates disruptive movements of thought and affect." Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image," in *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 31–45, here 43.

fig.2   Stan Douglas, *DCTs (RGBDCT07_2662)*, 2016, lacquered UV ink on gessoed panel, 100 × 100 × 5 cm. Courtesy of the artist, Victoria Miro, London, and David Zwirner, New York, London. © Stan Douglas.

fig.3   Stan Douglas, *DCTs (RGBDCT06_26(62))*, 2016, lacquered UV ink on gessoed panel, 100 × 100 × 5 cm. Courtesy of the artist, Victoria Miro, London, and David Zwirner, New York, London. © Stan Douglas.

fig.1   Stan Douglas, *Monodramas (I'm not Gary)*, 1991, 10 videos for broadcast television, color, sound, 30–60 sec each. Courtesy of the artist, Victoria Miro, London, and David Zwirner, New York, London. © Stan Douglas.
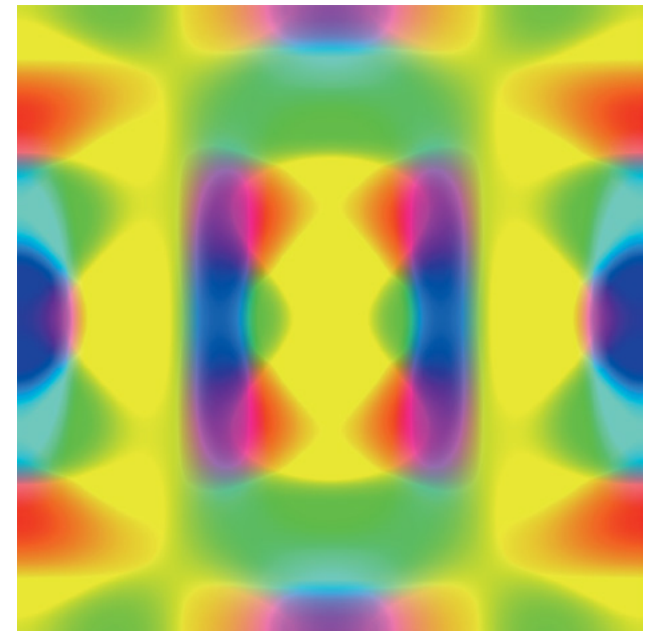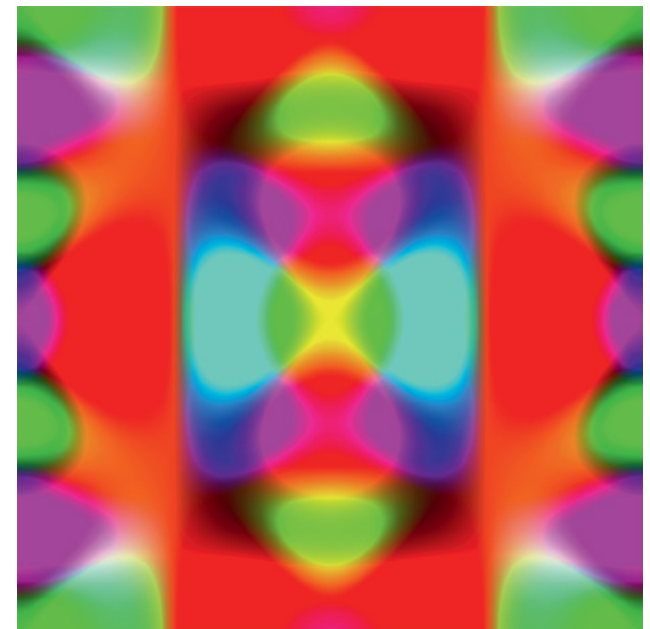
images (resonating with the statement "I'm not Gary"). Their indeterminacy stems not least from the fact that they are photographs appearing as paintings, or paintings appearing as digital screens, and thus cannot be clearly assigned to any medium.

The digital pictures apparently relate to the history of camera-less photography, to the photogram that has been created by placing objects directly on the light-sensitive surface of film, insofar as they too are generated without a camera, on the basis of a code. In this respect, they align with the historical avant-garde, which sought to liberate photography from its purely depictive function. László Moholy-Nagy, among others, speculated prominently on the possibilities, yet to be explored, of using apparatuses that had hitherto only served as reproduction for productive purposes. (23) He considered the process of camera-less photography, the optical sound on the film reel, and the groove-script of the phonograph to be leading the way for the creation of new optical and acoustic phenomena that are entirely independent of any preexisting reality. Stan Douglas's "reverse engineering" (24) of digital photography, in which it is not an image that is converted into a code, but a code into an image, corresponds to such an experimental "revaluation" (25) of artistic media.

However, the directly encoded image, in which the promise of the abolition of likeness seems to be redeemed, can no longer be understood on the historical grounds of the avant-garde. In contemporary practices of the circulation and distribution of image data it is almost ubiquitous, and thus belongs to a post-representational image regime in which the abolition of likeness has long since become the technological standard. In this sense, Stan Douglas has described his series as an attempt to disrupt the processes that underlie all digital images. (26) The discrete cosine transform (DCT), from which the series of works borrows its title, refers to a process that is mainly used for the lossy compression of image and video data, as in the case of the JPEG image format on which Stan Douglas's series is based. (27)

The term JPEG is an abbreviation for the Joint Photographic Experts Group, which developed this compression method and defined it as an ISO/IEC standard. Lossy compression ensures the highest possible visual quality at a comparatively low data transmission or bit rate. To achieve this, it takes advantage of the physiological findings on the human eye's inability to perceive fine gradations in colors, since these are less noticeable than differences in brightness. Belonging to numerical mathematics makes an understanding of the discrete cosine transform extremely complex, although its use is common and widespread. Streaming a series on Netflix, receiving HDTV television broadcasts, or watching a film on Blu-ray would be unthinkable without the discrete cosine transform as the industry's most common standard in signal processing. During compression, particularly the higher-frequency components to which the eye is less sensitive are neglected, without this being perceived as a loss of quality. In the transmission of moving images, compression also includes the dismissal of similar image information, so that in the case of image sequences, only the differences between the images are transmitted. By default, an image is broken down into eight by eight blocks of pixels interpreted as pixel values to which the discrete cosine transform is applied, creating coefficients that are then quantized and compressed, and finally reconstructed through

decompression in an inverse process. The lost information that is not recovered from the compressed data in the output image is assigned to so-called irrelevance reduction, that is declared dispensable as measured against the model of human perception on which it is based. (28) For the *DCTs*, Stan Douglas used the mathematical formula of the discrete cosine transform to program images directly, manipulating the amplitudes and frequencies of the individual coefficients until complex image patterns emerged from them. (29)

The *DCTs* appear as a further development of those aesthetically controlled products of photographic accidents that Douglas grouped together under the title *Corrupt Files* (2013) (f i g s . 4– 5). What seems to be a series of abstract images composed from vertical color stripes are in fact digital data patterns that resulted from a coding error on the memory card of the camera he was using. The moment of breakdown is linked to a technical malfunction: glitches during the photographic process that resulted from overheating because of camera overuse. In showing the abstractions that "emerge through the process of compressing representational images for reproduction," (30) the images display their very technical conditions. It seems significant that the "corrupt files" were made first accidentally and then willfully during the work on *Disco Angola* (2012), a photographic series that came from long-term research into the post-revolutionary phase following the Carnation Revolution in Portugal and its African colonies. Here, ruptures of the technical processes and protocols of digital photography, their visibility "upon breakdown," (31) corresponds with the ruptures of historical continuities in the context of the Carnation Revolution and the struggles for decolonization that followed it. *Disco Angola* stages scenes of civil war in Angola and scenes of disco culture in New York, each in four large-scale photographs, framed by the fictional authorship of a photojournalist who travels between these locations with his camera. Historical events are conceived together with media events as local and sometimes aleatory interruptions of a smooth functioning or operation of established order. With Susan Leigh Star and Geoffrey C. Bowker, one could understand the relation between the photographic series *Disco Angola* and the *Corrupt Files* as an "infrastructural inversion," a change of perspective that makes visible "the depth of interdependence of technical networks and standards, on the one hand, and the real work of politics and knowledge production on the other." (32) The surfacing of discrete protocols of technical operation thereby obtains "causal prominence in many areas usually attributed to heroic actors, social movements, or cultural mores." (33)

Stan Douglas has repeatedly associated moments of political upheaval, unrest, and revolution with ruptures in media infrastructures of communication and their habitual use. In doing so, he also refers to the importance of these infrastructures regarding the establishment and stabilization of political power relations, making them at the same time the Achilles' heel of these relations. In the video installation *The Secret Agent* (2015), which once again looks at the post-revolutionary phase after the Carnation Revolution, it is the transatlantic telephone cable that becomes the object of such "infrastructural inversion." In this work, which is based on Joseph Conrad's 1907 spy novel of the same name, Douglas moves the action from Victorian London to Lisbon in the "hot summer" of 1975: a transitional

(21)
"My work is looking at where things break down, and in that moment of breakdown what choices we make." Stan Douglas in an interview with William S. Smith, "In the Studio: Stan Douglas," *Art in America*, April 1, 2018, https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/studio-stan-douglas-63499/.

(22)
Stan Douglas quoted in Ilana Jael, "Art Out: Stan Douglas: DCTs and Scenes from the Blackout," *Musée*, April 12, 2018, https://museemagazine.com/culture/2018/4/11/art-out-stan-douglas-dct-and-blackout.

(23)
László Moholy-Nagy, "Production – Reproduction (1922)," in *Moholy-Nagy*, ed. Krisztina Passuth (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1985), 289–90. See also László Moholy-Nagy, "New Form in Music: Potentialities of the Phonograph (1923)," in Passuth, *Moholy-Nagy*, 291–92; László Moholy-Nagy, "Problems of the Modern Film (1930)," in Passuth, *Moholy-Nagy*, 311–15.

(24)
Douglas in Smith, "In the Studio."

(25)
Moholy-Nagy, "Production – Reproduction," 290.

(26)
"I'm manipulating the kinds of harmonic interactions that essentially undergird all digital images." Douglas in Smith, "In the Studio."

(27)
William B. Pennebaker and Joan L. Mitchell, *JPEG Still Image Data Compression Standard* (New York: Springer, 1992).

(28)
In a mathematically proficient explanation of the discrete cosine transform, Cory Arcangel demonstrates the effects of lossy image compression. See Cory Arcangel, "On Compression," in *A Couple Thousand Short Films about Glenn Gould* (London: Film and Video Umbrella, 2008), 220–32. For a helpful introduction, see Adrian Mackenzie, "Codecs," in *Software Studies: A Lexicon*, ed. Matthew Fuller (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2008), 48–54. On the history of compression, see, e.g., Jonathan Sterne, "Compression: A Loose History," in *Signal Traffic: Critical Studies of Media Infrastructures*, ed. Lisa Parks and Nicole Starosielski (Urbana and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 31–52.

(29)
See Stan Douglas's artist talk on the occasion of receiving the Hasselblad Award 2016 in Gothenburg, Sweden, October 18, 2016, Hasselblad Foundation, 59:00–1:03:50, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EqxQx-g4ORp4. See also the catalog, *Stan Douglas: Hasselblad Award 2016* (London and Stockholm: MACK and Hasselblad Foundation, 2016).

(30)
The Polygon, "Stan Douglas: Synthetic Pictures," March 2014, https://thepolygon.ca/exhibition/stan-douglas-synthetic-pictures/.

(31)
Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star, *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1999), 35. According to Bowker and Star, infrastructure is defined by invisibility and, thus, only "becomes visible upon breakdown."

(32)
As stated by Susan Leigh Star and Geoffrey C. Bowker, infrastructural inversion "means learning to look closely at technologies and arrangements that, by design and habit, tend to fade into the woodwork (sometimes literally!)." Bowker and Star, *Sorting Things Out*, 34.

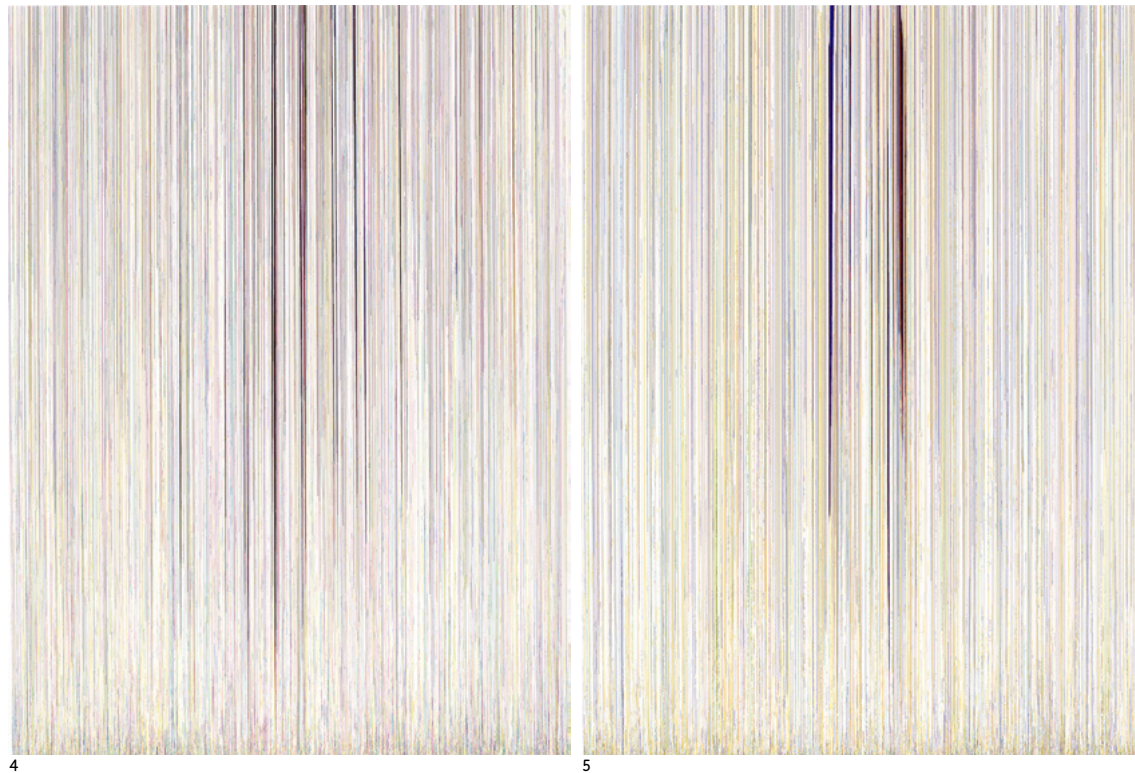(33)
Bowker and Star, *Sorting Things Out*, 34.

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fig. 4   Stan Douglas, *Corrupt Files (2010_2329)*, 2013, inkjet prints mounted on Dibond aluminum, 200 × 156.2 cm. Courtesy of the artist, Victoria Miro, London, and David Zwirner, New York, London. © Stan Douglas.

fig. 5   Stan Douglas, *Corrupt Files (2010_3024)*, 2013, inkjet prints mounted on Dibond aluminum, 200 × 156.2 cm. Courtesy of the artist, Victoria Miro, London, and David Zwirner, New York, London. © Stan Douglas.

period marked by political unrest following the Carnation Revolution of April 25, 1974, which overthrew the authoritarian dictatorship in Portugal and ended its colonial rule. The revolutionary process, accompanied by socialist aspirations of nationalization and agrarian reform, ended on November 25, 1975 with the defeat of an attempted coup in favor of a communist state, which paved the way for the transition to a democracy with a capitalist economic order. Douglas sets the action in an atmosphere of secret politics and open violence between radical Right and Left groups in the struggle for the country's future. In this fictional staging of historical upheaval, disconnectivity—as I use the term here (34)—refers to an aesthetic operation to open up new possibilities unrealized in history: "not to redeem these past events but to reconsider them: to understand why these utopian moments did not fulfil themselves, what larger forces kept a local moment a minor moment: and what was valuable there— what might still be useful today." (35)

Inspired by the unsuccessful bombing of London's Greenwich Observatory by a French anarchist on February 15, 1894, Conrad devised a fictional plot in which the assassination is directed at the geopolitical center of the world at that time in the prime meridian. In Stan Douglas's work, the observatory at Greenwich is replaced by the transatlantic cable, "that braid of copper under the Atlantic," (36) which had connected Portugal, as a peripheral country within industrialized Europe in the 19th century, to the telegraphic "umbilical cord between Europe and the New World." (37) Owing to the geographical location of Portugal and its African colonies, it represented an important node within the telegraphic network, in which Lisbon, Cape Verde, and the Azores formed the so-called Atlantic strategic triangle. Portugal was not only subject to the imperialist interests that guided this project but was itself able to assert its position as a colonial power within Europe, not least by using the telegraph network to politically and administratively control its colonies. (38) Here, in *The Secret Agent*, the assault on the undersea cable as media infrastructure surfaces on the level of the plot, (39) where it constitutes the central blank space of the narrative. The premature explosion of the bomb that claims an innocent and senseless victim is not shown; it remains blackened out, haunting the separated and multiple offscreen spaces of the six-channel installation.

The history of the technical infrastructures of communication, through which control and power could be exercised over great distances, is closely linked to the history of imperialism and colonialism. In this context, James Beniger coined the term "control revolution" regarding the late 19th century, to which the transatlantic cable as well as the inventions of telegraphy and the telephone, the typewriter, photography, cinematography and, in the 20th century, radio and television owe their existence. (40) These technical infrastructures thus also established a practice of domination that subordinated local and indigenous forms of knowledge and modes of communication to the principles of industrial standardization and structured social practices of communication along the lines of commodity circulation. As historical fiction, borne from meticulous archival research, the failed assault on the transatlantic cable in *The Secret Agent* points to the potentialities of disrupting power relations that constitute the long history of colonialism. (41) In Stan Douglas's

(34)
I have benefited immensely from the discussions during my research fellowship at the Käte Hamburger Research Center "Dis:connectivity in Processes of Globalisation" (global dis:connect) in Munich, where a version of this paper was presented in June 2022. I thank my colleagues, including Christopher Balme, Burcu Dogramaci, Sumathi Ramaswamy, Martin Rempe, Sujit Sivasundaram, Sabine Sörgel, Roland Wenzlhuemer, and Callie Wilkinson for valuable insights.

(35)
Stan Douglas in an interview with Lynne Cooke, "Broadcast Views," *Frieze*, no. 12 (September 1993): 41–45, here 41.

(36)
Quoted from the script for *The Secret Agent* in Stan Douglas, *The Secret Agent*, exh. cat., Wiels Centre d'Art Contemporain, Brussels (Brussels: Ludion, 2015), 81–110, here 86.

(37)
Douglas, *The Secret Agent*, 86.

(38)
See Ana Paula Silva, "Portugal and the Building of Atlantic Telegraph Networks," *Journal of History of Science and Technology* 2 (Fall 2008): 191–212, here 210–11, http://johost.eu/vol2_fall_2008/vol2_as.htm.

(39)
According to Nicole Starosielski, undersea cables have only rarely been investigated as media infrastructures, in which the "everyday politics and practices of media distribution" are entangled in the histories of colonialism and global capitalism. Nicole Starosielski, "Fixed Flow: Undersea Cables as Media Infrastructures," in *Signal Traffic: Critical Studies of Media Infrastrutures*, ed. Lisa Parks and Nicole Starosielski (Urbana and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 53–70, here 54.

work, the susceptibility of technical infrastructures to failure and breakage is precisely linked to an engagement with this history, through an interference from which other possibilities of cooperation and exchange can emerge.

Following Jacques Attali's idea that music "constitutes the audible waveband of the vibrations and signs that make up society" (42) and can thus act as the herald of social change, Douglas repeatedly seeks such potential in musical practices of remixing, sampling, and the fusion of historical styles. This is the subject of *Luanda-Kinshasa* (2013), a work that, along with *Disco Angola* and *The Secret Agent*, forms a trilogy (43) and features a fictional live recording of an improvised jam session at the legendary Columbia Records studio in New York, in a seemingly endless six-hour (361-minute) video loop. The video is a performance of what could have been Miles Davis's next recording after his then maligned 1972 studio album *On the Corner*, had he continued his exploration of jazz fusion with other popular music genres from African-American origin to include Afrobeat, which was then emerging in the New York underground disco scene. And it is the subject of *ISDN* (2022), which stages an equally fictional music session.

On two large screens facing each other, two pairs of rappers—one in London, the other in Cairo—are engaging in a musical dialog of call-and-response, bridging the distance between their remote studios via ISDN telephone connection (f i g s . 6–7). Their performance is reminiscent of the popular practice of "rap battles" in which MCs and their producers would compete to prove their skills, their sessions often recorded on the spot in different locations or released online simultaneously. Featuring TrueMendous and Lady Sanity from Britain and Raptor and Yousef Joker from Egypt, the installation creates a dialog between the musical genres of Grime (with its British African-Caribbean influence) and Mahraganat (with its roots in popular Egyptian Shaabi music) that emerged independently around the same time from the underground of their distinct communities and borne from the social discontent and revolt, which spurred the global upheavals of 2011; the year also mapped in Douglas's photo series *2011 ≠ 1848* (2021) that was commissioned for the Canadian Pavilion at the 2022 Venice Biennale and to which ISDN was conceived in correspondence. (44) Both Grime and Mahraganat have been distributed unofficially before receiving mainstream media attention and produced with accessible technology, making use of FruityLoops, later called FL Studio, a low-cost, easy-to-use and often pirated software for the creation of electronic music. The software facilitated the sharing of knowledge, not only about the making of music but about the social experience expressed through its practice, which is why it "found itself at the core of the conversation across the development of multiple genres and styles all across the world." (45)

What seems like a recorded live session is actually a fictional scenario, meticulously staged in the studio and musically arranged by an algorithm. ISDN (Integrated Services Digital Network), from which the work borrows its title, was introduced as a now superseded international communication standard for the simultaneous digital transmission of voice and video over the public telephone network. Here, however, it is not the actual technology on which the performers' exchange is based but a name for what Erika Balsom,

(40)
James R. Beniger, *The Control Revolution: Technological and Economic Origins of the Information Society* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1986), 7. On the history of the telegraph, see especially Roland Wenzlhuemer, *Connecting the Nineteenth-Century World: The Telegraph and Globalization* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

(41)
The attack is aimed at the cable station of the Portuguese company Rádio Marconi (CPRM) in Sesimbra, Portugal. Two submarine cables were connected to each other at this junction in 1969, linking Sesimbra with Melkbosstrand, South Africa and Goonhilly in Cornwall.

(42)
Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, [1977] 1985), 4. See also Steve Goodman, "1977: A Sense of the Future," in *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2010), 49–53.

(43)
See Pedro Lapa, *History and Interregnum: Three Works by Stan Douglas* (Berlin and Lisbon: Archive Books and Museu Coleção Berardo, 2015).

(44)
Stan Douglas, *Tunis, 23 January 2011*, 2021; *Vancouver, 15 June 2011*, 2021; *London, 9 August 2011 (Pembury Estate)*, 2017; *New York City, 10 October 2011*, 2021; chromogenic prints on Dibond, from the series *2011 ≠ 1848*, 2021. The four large-scale photographs restage scenes from the Arab Spring in Tunis, the Occupy protests on Brooklyn Bridge in New York, the Hackney riots in London as well as the Stanley Cup riot in Vancouver.

(45)
Declan McGlynn, "How FL Studio Changed Electronic Music Forever," *DJ Mag*, April 20, 2020, https://djmag.com/longreads/how-fl-studio-changed-electronic-music-forever.

6

figs. 6–7   Stan Douglas, *ISDN*, 2022, two-channel video installation, color, sound. Courtesy of the artist, Victoria Miro, London and Venice, and David Zwirner, New York, London, Paris, and Hong Kong. © Stan Douglas.

7

in an essay on the work, has called the "generative fiction" (46) of connecting distant sites on the globe. This connection, figuring as ISDN, is thus not technically given but operates in the realm of the potential. If the *Corrupt Files* and *DCT*s were based on the "infrastructural inversion" of making visible the scripts by which media discretely operate, then here, we have a case of the fictional circumvention of these processes that overwrites these scripts. In fact, the lyrics and the bass line running at 140 bpm (which is the default tempo on FL) (47) were recorded separately, arranged by an algorithm into the permutations of a constantly changing sound pattern that would take more than two weeks to be experienced in full circle. (48) At the end of each loop, the camera rises to reveal the studios' respective locations, opening the view on the vast nocturnal cityscapes of London and Cairo before a new loop, a new sequential iteration or permutation begins with the pressing of the button on the audio codec displayed full screen: "ISDN: Connection."

Infrastructures of media communication have served the interests of imperial power and corporate capitalism as well as they have enabled alternative or even revolutionary forms of participation in the service of the people. Disconnecting, thus, becomes an operation dependent on the networks and cables of the existing power structures it strives to disrupt, with the same compression and transmission technologies applied to revolutionary and counter-revolutionary content. In Stan Douglas's work, however, disconnecting does not amount to a mere technical operation, rather it involves a detachment from habitual ways of connecting and relating that have been prescribed by the standards and formats of media technologies formed in the economic or political interest of building a global world.

In interviews, Stan Douglas has frequently mentioned the impression that Samuel Beckett's 1931 essay "Proust" made on him, referring to the memorable line, in which Beckett characterizes Proust's idea of habit: "Habit is the ballast which chains the dog to its vomit." (49) The deliberate breaking of habit has been a constant aspiration in his work, opening social and political history to other possibilities that were closed down by habitual thought and action. (50) Formats play an important role here, as they belong to an embodied history of media use in which certain ways of experiencing or perceiving may persist even after the technologies that shaped them have become obsolete. In his proposal of a theory of format, Jonathan Sterne has alluded to Panofsky's gesture of lifting the hat to make plausible the "persistence of residual imperatives in custom and sensibility" (51) prevalent in media use today. The gesture of lifting the hat, however, may not only describe the ways in which habits have served to facilitate communication between "civilized men," and the ways in which they have excluded others from this realm of civilization, producing the category of "the Australian bushman." It may also point to the measures by which such "residual imperatives" can be contested or countered—which would be another way of describing Stan Douglas's operational aesthetics of disconnection to envision other possibilities of relating to each other.

(46)
Erika Balsom, "Another Year in the Life of the Crowd," in *2011 ≠ 1848*, published in conjunction with the exhibition at the Venice Biennale, April 23 to November 27, 2022 (Cologne: Walther König, 2022), 118.

(47)
It is likely due to the use of FL that 140 bpm also became the standard speed of Grime.

(48)
See Jason Farago, "At Venice Biennale, Contemporary Art Sinks or Swims," *New York Times*, April 21, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/21/arts/design/venice-biennale.html; David Zwirner, "Stan Douglas 2011 ≠ 1848," https://www.davidzwirner.com/venice-2022/stan-douglas.

(49)
See, e.g., Stan Douglas in an interview with Joe Lloyd, "A Re-enactment Is an Event that Becomes Processed in Memory," *Studio International*, November 17, 2017, https://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/stan-douglas-interview-a-reenactment-is-an-event-that-becomes-processed-in-memory; Stan Douglas in an interview with Ella Huzenis, "Artist Stan Douglas Wants to Take You to Another Earth," *Interview Magazine*, January 31, 2020, https://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/artist-stan-douglas-doppelganger-david-zwirner.

(50)
"I'm trying to reconsider what has been either a discarding of personal habit or a larger cultural one, in as much as cultural forces go through the same process." Douglas in Cooke, "Broadcast Views." See also Scott Watson, "Survey: Against the Habitual," in *Stan Douglas*, ed. Carol J. Clover, Diana Thater, and Scott Watson (London: Phaidon, 1998), 30–67.

(51)
Jonathan Sterne, "Format Theory," in *MP3: The Meaning of a Format* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2012), 1–31, here 15. In this passage, Sterne refers to the 128k standard of ISDN, which remained the default in many programs despite the higher bitrates of DSL, and attributes the preference of "university-aged listeners" for this format standard to "familiarity."