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# Phantasmagoric Places: Local and Global Tensions in the Circulation of Stan Douglas's *Every Building on 100 West Hastings*

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## Abstract

Stan Douglas's *Every Building on 100 West Hastings* (2001) represents a seamless panorama of one block of the Downtown Eastside in Vancouver, a neighborhood known as "the poorest postal code in Canada." By documenting the block in detail, *100 West Hastings* functions as critique in its local viewing context by focusing on a discrepancy in the triumphalist narrative of global capitalism; while the rest of Vancouver has recovered from deindustrialization to participate in the global economy, Douglas's image demonstrates that the Downtown Eastside has declined, becoming an anxiety-inducing foil for the city. Despite these local significances, the political impact of the image changes when viewed in other contexts, including London's Serpentine Gallery and the lobby of Toronto's McCarthy-Tétrault law firm. This article charts these divergent readings of the photograph, attending to the ways locale is understood and questioning the limitations of fine art photography as a form of social critique.

**Keywords:** Stan Douglas, photography, *Every Building on 100 West Hastings*, Downtown Eastside, circulation

## Introduction

Stan Douglas's monumental, sixteen-foot long photograph, *Every Building on 100 West Hastings* (2001, Figure 1), represents a seamless panorama of a block of the Downtown Eastside in Vancouver. The neighborhood it depicts is colloquially known as "the poorest postal code in Canada" and is synonymous with the dozens of missing and murdered women from the area, some of whose remains were



**Fig 1** Stan Douglas, *Every Building on 100 West Hastings*, 2001. Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner; New York.

found on convicted serial killer Robert Pickton's farm.<sup>1</sup> A street that had its heyday during North America's industrial and resource booms of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, West Hastings street has experienced a period of significant economic decline in the past few decades due to a complicated nexus of local and global forces. While the rest of Vancouver has recovered from deindustrialization to participate in the global, service-based economy—its prosperity driven in large part by the booming tech, film and tourism industries along North America's West Coast and by the city's proximity to the Pacific Rim and East Asia trade markets—the Downtown Eastside has, instead, declined, becoming an anxiety-inducing foil for the rest of the city.

On the surface, the decline of the area appears to have occurred in isolation and in contradistinction to the rest of the city's economic success. News and media outlets have therefore linked the Downtown Eastside's current state to causes as divergent as: the globalization of trade and a growing international drug market; the waning of a national welfare state; a shift in the provincial government's priorities from a resource economy to a post-industrial economy; and ongoing civic issues of city planning, law enforcement and the real estate market (O'Brian 2007). While Vancouver's affluent areas continue to succeed in the globalized economy in a process that has seemed to accelerate, the Downtown Eastside has proven resistant to these same forces, resisting gentrification and

redevelopment to pay testament to the unseemly (and therefore largely unrepresented) results of global capitalism: that, while those who have social and cultural capital continue to participate in and benefit from an international economy, those who are unable to participate now constitute a new Third World within the First World (Trinh 1987: 138). Geographers Jeff Sommers and Nick Blomley have gone so far as to argue that the Downtown Eastside operates as a point of contrast for the rest of the city, developing (or devolving) in direct relation to the city's economic prosperity and involvement in globalized trade. They write:

That which now characterizes the neighbourhood—the open drug market, the deepening poverty and desperation, the run-down streetscape—are products of the same forces which induced the proliferation of condo towers, art galleries, restaurants, cafés, nightclubs, townhouses, heritage neighbourhoods, and inner city middle class consumers. (2002: 53)

Though the Downtown Eastside carries with it a particular set of references for Vancouverites accustomed to seeing it represented in local news media, it is not intelligible in the same way for national and international visitors. In many ways, it looks like some of the “before” images of the world's other downtrodden-neighborhoods-turned-chic, such as London's Soho neighborhood, or the Bowery area of

New York City famously documented by Martha Rosler. But unlike these other cosmopolitan areas, the Downtown Eastside has not reached an “after” stage of gentrification. Indeed, it seems to mark the impossibility of urban gentrification’s promises for social amelioration. Much like Douglas’s previous series of photographs of Detroit (1998) and subsequent suite of images of Cuba (2005), the *100 West Hastings* photograph depicts a specific locale where the promise of global capitalism and modern progress has gone awry. However, while Detroit and Cuba are sites of generalized poverty and decline caused by large-scale forces such as the collapse of the auto-industry, white flight and communism, the Downtown Eastside is an anomalous, localized version of this underdevelopment. When the city hosted the 2010 Olympic Games, for instance, the discrepancy between the Downtown Eastside and the prosperity of the rest of Vancouver became unmistakable. In particular, the rhetorical construction of the neighborhood as an off-limits “ghetto” for international visitors intensified despite its central location in the city’s most affluent and commercially successful neighbourhoods. The Downtown Eastside cannot be obliterated from the urban landscape or the city’s mapping system: it is located three blocks east of the downtown core and some of the most expensive housing in the city, two blocks south of the historic Gastown neighbourhood replete with tourist shops and trendy restaurants, and just north of False Creek’s rapidly expanding condominium developments. As Sommers and Blomley succinctly argue, “if this place is an isolated ghetto, it must be the most accessible and well-known one in history” (2002: 29). The Downtown Eastside therefore operates locally as a rhetorical and visual discrepancy in the city’s larger narrative of the triumph of global capitalism, serving as a persistent reminder of the local flipside of Vancouver’s globalized prosperity.

Through its detailed exploration of the streetscape of the Downtown Eastside, Douglas’s

*100 West Hastings* photograph provides evidence of the city’s transformation through Vancouver’s own particular engagement with the globalization of the economy. In its local viewing context, Douglas’s photograph functions as critique by focusing on this discrepancy in the triumphalist narrative of global capitalism. I argue that to recognize *100 West Hastings’* relationship to the discourse on globalization, one must engage these broader issues through Vancouver’s particular experience. This means that *100 West Hastings* constructs a paradoxical understanding of place where the material locale is haunted by immaterial and intangible global forces. *100 West Hastings’* street scene pictures a specific place—a “somewhere”—while mimicking processes that occur around the world, simultaneously representing “everywhere” and a kind of existential “nowhere.” In the case of *100 West Hastings*, the image’s role as a critique of globalization relies on the viewer’s ability to identify the urban landscape it pictures, to call up what this space typically looks like in mass media depictions, and to recognize that it might constitute a critical alternative to progressive narratives of global capitalism.<sup>2</sup>

*100 West Hastings’* critical engagement with discourses of globalization is complicated, however, by the photograph’s status as a physical art object that circulates, and is implicated in, the same economic systems it critiques. The photograph’s participation in this global art market, as well as the conditions of its production, which borrow the aesthetic strategies and facture of high-end commercial photography and filmmaking, raise questions about the implications of borrowing techniques from dominant forms of representation in order to critique globalization. Does the photograph maintain its critical potential when viewed outside Vancouver? Or is its critical function displaced and negated by a viewing experience constructed through the glossy, aesthetic conventions of commercial film production? This article attempts

to answer some of these questions by analyzing how the locale of Douglas's photograph is understood and misunderstood by viewers. As method, this paper follows Douglas's interest in connecting the individual circumstances of local sites to international discourses. By examining the circulation of Douglas's photograph in particular local and international contexts, I draw broader connections between the divergent and conflicting interpretive strategies brought to the image. Paying particular attention to three case studies—the photograph's first public exhibition in London at the Serpentine Gallery, its debut in Vancouver at the Contemporary Art Gallery, and its ongoing presentation in the lobby of Toronto's McCarthy-Tétrault law firm—I argue that the critical dimensions of Douglas's image are subject to the discursive setting in which the photograph is exhibited. Importantly, this susceptibility of the photograph's meaning indicates that the image can elicit readings that reproduce the very mechanisms of globalization—in particular, the homogenization of difference and the elision of specificity—which *100 West Hastings* aims to critique.<sup>3</sup>

### **“The Worst Block in Vancouver”**

*Every Building on 100 West Hastings*, as its title suggests, depicts every lot on a block of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Taken at night and theatrically over-lit, it captures the buildings that occupy the south side of the block of 100 West Hastings in remarkable detail. Completely depopulated, the image calls up documentation of Hollywood film sets and studio constructions of city facades, referencing Vancouver's history as “Hollywood North,” an affordable stand-in for American cities in movies and television series. The reference to film production also implies that the site is merely a set: that the “real” action and actors that will lend the scene its specificity and significance have yet to arrive. Hotels, pawnshops and convenience stores are the most common surviving businesses, while six lots are either

for sale or lease by realtor Fred Yuen, hinting at the economic downturn the neighborhood has experienced. Handmade signs in shop windows advertise closing sales, pawnshops offer to “buy, sell, or trade” goods, convenience stores announce ATMs and cheap cigarettes, and two closed circuit cameras surveil the left-hand street corner outside Jaysons Food Market.

Stitched together from twenty-one separate photographs, *100 West Hastings's* formal composition and impressive scale create an uncomfortable perspectival position for the viewer. Its panoramic format, the only one of its kind in Douglas's photographic oeuvre, references a long history of landscape and geographical survey photography, which was meant to provide an authoritative, all-encompassing viewpoint over the land being depicted. But rather than providing an aesthetically pleasing organizational structure for Douglas's picturing of the Downtown Eastside, the massive scale of the panoramic image forces the viewer's eye to repeatedly skip across the length of the street in search of a resting place. A crosswalk and traffic light, slightly to the right of the centre of the image, offer a possible focal point, but they lead to an unseen destination behind the viewer. This view of the block, which would be impossible to replicate with unaided, natural vision, emphasizes movement across the surface of the photographed streetscape, mimicking Douglas's assertion that the Downtown Eastside is delineated by the “borders in the city which are caused by the movement of economics or people” (in Mackie 2002).

While these visual details provide clues about the block's relationship to its host city, it is actually that which Douglas *does not* picture—the block's residents, the other buildings in the community and the area's social history—that makes *100 West Hastings* a remarkable representation. Douglas's decision to remove the actors and props that might lend the street a specific reading is striking, especially in contrast to its historical precedents. Ed Ruscha's artist book, *Every Building*

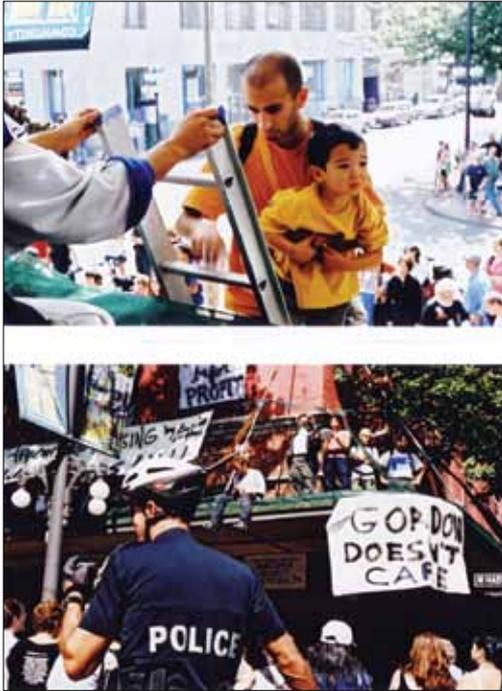
on the *Sunset Strip* (1966), in particular, served as the inspiration for both the title and form of Douglas's photograph. *Every Building on 100 West Hastings* was meant to be a direct "knock-off" of Ruscha's photograph, which Douglas created for a "Knock Off"—themed fundraiser for a Vancouver artist-run centre that was formerly housed in the same block (Mackie 2002). Replicating Ruscha's snapshot, "non-art" aesthetic, Douglas used a digital camera to take photographs of the block during daylight hours and roughly assembled the snapshots into a panorama format (Mackie 2002). Though this photograph never circulated outside of the fundraiser (it was purchased by Vancouver curator Scott Watson and hangs in his private collection), Douglas was interested by the results of this project and decided to create a more finished and aesthetically refined version. He returned to the street with his studio assistants from ten in the evening to four in the morning on August 27, 2001, when he blocked off pedestrian and street traffic, lit the block with cinematic lighting and photographed it with his customary, large-format camera set up on a tripod (Mackie 2002). Unlike Ruscha's exercise in depicting the banality of the Sunset Strip, including its pedestrians and car traffic, in snapshots haphazardly taken from a moving car, *100 West Hastings* is instead the result of rigorous aesthetic control and laborious post-production editing.

The erasure of human figures from an economically depressed neighbourhood also recalls Martha Rosler's series *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems* (1974–75). In Rosler's project, the artist presented depopulated photographs of sites in New York City's impoverished Bowery district alongside a text that listed euphemisms for drunkenness. Just as Rosler's double system of visual and textual descriptions was inadequate for conveying the reality of the lives of the people in the Bowery, Douglas's photograph seems to also be based on the premise that photography cannot be indexical when it comes to representing the lived

experience of the Downtown Eastside. There are, however, important aesthetic differences in Rosler and Douglas's approaches to documenting depopulated cityscapes. While Rosler's project was a direct response to the political inadequacies of social documentary photography and therefore adopted that genre's grainy, minimalist, black and white aesthetic, Douglas's *100 West Hastings* depicts a glossy, richly coloured, almost cinematographic space that is more in line with the formal strategies and concerns of film-making.

*100 West Hastings* is particularly unsettling to local viewers because of this emptying out of the subjects that usually occupy the sidewalks of the Downtown Eastside streetscape. The people who live and work along 100 West Hastings are often members of marginalized social groups such as the homeless, sex trade workers and drug users who are repeatedly pictured and misrepresented in Vancouver's news media. The neighborhood has not only become synonymous with these issues in public debate, but the Downtown Eastside has also become a hub for community groups, social workers and other services that offer resources for homelessness, addiction and mental health. Douglas's refusal to picture these figures therefore creates an unusual view of 100 West Hastings that is purposefully unfaithful to both popular representations and lived experiences of the landscape.

The location of 100 West Hastings within the city is another important, unrepresented component of Douglas's image. The specificity of the photograph's location is revealed by the work's title, which names the exact address where the photograph was taken.<sup>4</sup> Once designated "the worst block in Vancouver" by the Vancouver Police Department, 100 West Hastings marks the divide between the developed and underdeveloped sections of the city (Sommers and Blomley 2002: 19). One of the most potent markers of this division is the building that once housed Woodward's department store, located directly across the street and behind the viewer

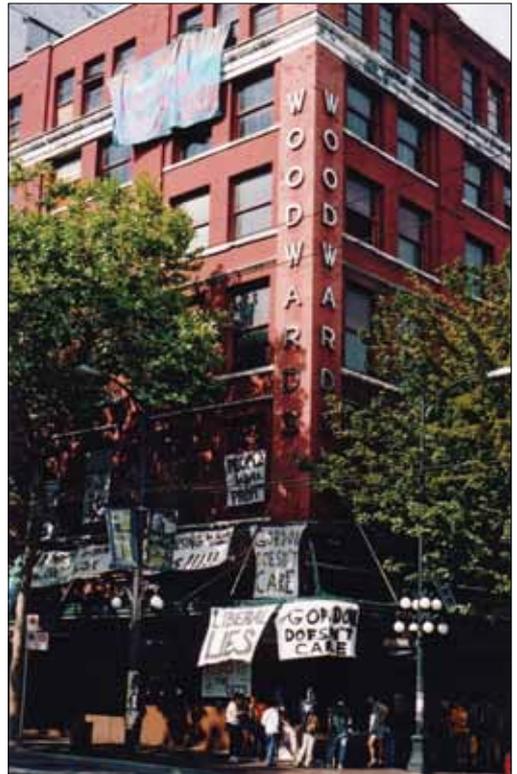


**Fig 2** “The Woodsquat,” 2002. Photo: Murray Bush, flux photo.

in Douglas’s photograph. The store, which closed due to declining business in 1993, has become a highly charged symbol in the ongoing conflict over who owns the physical and intangible rights to the neighbourhood. In 2002, during the planning stages of the Woodward’s redevelopment, a public debate between commercial developers aiming to turn the building into condominiums and community groups petitioning for affordable social housing escalated into a four-month live-in staged by squatters on the sidewalk around the building (Figures 2 and 3).

It is difficult to overestimate the impact of the live-in (which became known as the “Woodsquat”) on local politics in Vancouver, or the way in which it transformed *Every Building on 100 West Hastings* into a symbol

of this struggle over the built environment in the wake of globalization. Not only did the protest garner significant media attention, but the demonstration also united a variety of countercultural movements—including Olympic Games protestors, advocates for the homeless, and those calling attention to the missing women from the neighbourhood—around one tangible, identifiable issue.<sup>5</sup> More importantly, Woodsquat was successful in resisting some of the seemingly faceless effects of urban gentrification. As a result of the protest, the City of Vancouver relented, agreeing to include both condos and social housing in the renovated building.



**Fig 3** “The Woodsquat,” 2002. Photo: Murray Bush, flux photo.

In the meantime, the blocks surrounding the closed department store continued to provide a wide range of social services and, despite ongoing public controversy over its legal and ethical implications, Insite, North America's first supervised injection site for intravenous drug users (Vancouver Coastal Health 2003). Through the squat, then, a local, independently owned department store, forced to close as globalization made suburban "big box" stores and shopping malls more profitable, was rescued from redevelopment as high-end condos and partly transformed into social housing. Though mixed-use housing is by no means an adequate or complete solution to poverty, the Woodward's building, and its neighbouring blocks, represents a site in Vancouver's recent history where local idioms successfully resisted the global forces of gentrification and redevelopment.

With this highly politicized context in mind, I argue that *100 West Hastings* functions as a critique of Vancouver's engagement with the globalized economy for local viewers who can recognize the importance of the place it pictures. This emphasis on the significance of the local context sets Douglas's work apart from photographic production in Vancouver, offering a new strategy for representing place to international art audiences. Douglas's contemporaries in the so-called Vancouver School of photo-conceptualism (an unofficial group of conceptual and post-conceptual photographers including Jeff Wall, Ken Lum, Roy Arden and Ian Wallace) often create large-scale staged and street photography in the same area of the city. But the explicit aim of these representations is to depict scenes in a "non-place": sites that could be anywhere (or nowhere) in a developed, postindustrial, globalized urban landscape.<sup>6</sup> This emphasis on an abstracted "nowhere" setting in the work of the Vancouver School helps to explain its success in the international art market (Wood 2005: 66). Yet *100 West Hastings* reverses this claim by naming the exact

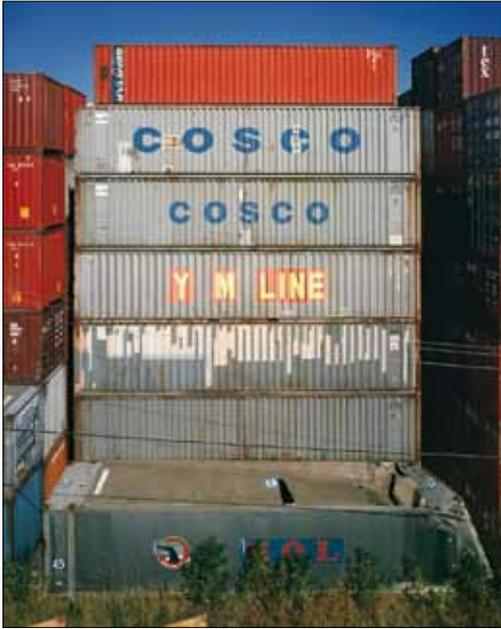
"somewhere" it depicts, implicitly questioning whether a photograph can signify both *somewhere* and *nowhere*, equally and simultaneously; both a distinct, identifiable locale and an abstracted metaphor for a larger global condition.

Rather than prioritizing one local context above all others, Douglas's photograph points to a different conceptualization of place where local and global issues are inextricably linked and decidedly interconnected. Douglas's picturing of the Downtown Eastside reminds viewers that we can no longer disentangle global causes from their local effects, nor distinguish where these causes originated and who is responsible for their repercussions.

### **Ambiguity and Uncertainty at the Serpentine Gallery**

The formal structure of *Every Building on 100 West Hastings* does not immediately disclose its local significance to viewers who are unfamiliar with the social and political history of Vancouver. It is no surprise, then, that when the photograph was exhibited in a public gallery for the first time at London's Serpentine Gallery in 2002, the curatorial team emphasized this "non-place" banality in their interpretations.

Located in the city's Kensington Gardens and free to the public, the Serpentine Gallery's programming focuses on solo exhibitions and small group shows of work by modern and contemporary artists. Displayed alongside nineteen other works, Douglas's photograph was included in the exhibition "Journey into Fear" organized by two resident curators: exhibition organizer Achim Borchardt-Hume and the former chief curator, Lisa G. Corrin (*Stan Douglas: Journey into Fear* 2002: 163). "Journey into Fear" took its name from Douglas's most recent film project, a looping narrative set on a container ship at sea. One of Douglas's now-famous "recombinant narratives" which does not follow a linear progression, the film instead uses a computer system to shuffle the scenes into

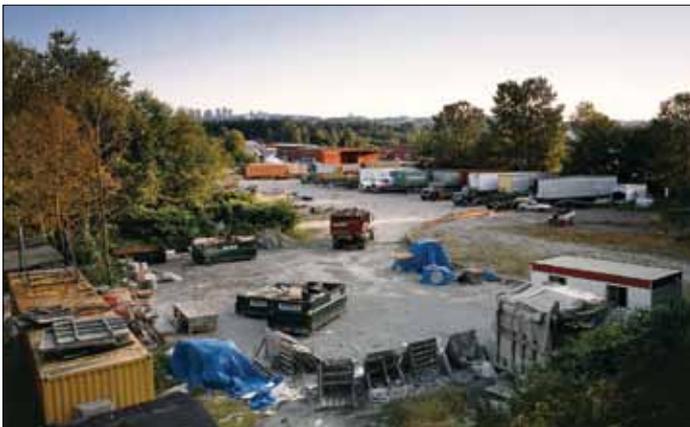


**Fig 4** Stan Douglas, *Damaged Containers*, Mitchell Island, 2001. Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner, New York.

endlessly different combinations. The plot follows two characters' argument over the ship's arrival time as it transpires in the pilot's cabin. The male character, Möller, is in charge of safeguarding the

ship's containers and wants to delay the arrival of the ship by one day. Due to changing market values, he and his unidentified clients stand to gain US \$75 million if the cargo arrives late. Möller is trying to convince Graham, the female character and pilot whose job it is to get the ship to port on time, to delay the ship's arrival. Graham refuses, despite flattery, bribery and eventually death threats, and then exits the cabin. The viewer never finds out who wins the argument, though it is clear through references to American money and Singapore goods that Douglas is alluding to issues of globalization, capitalism, and the shifting ethical implications of speculation and international trade.

Because this was Douglas's first solo exhibition in the UK, and the world premier of *Journey into Fear*, the Serpentine catalogue focuses on the new film and frames Douglas's body of work as a monographic statement from an artist affiliated with Vancouver photoconceptualism; however, the catalog also documents the other works in the show, such as two earlier Douglas films set in Berlin and Detroit, and a series of still colour photographs of sites around these films' settings. This series included four large-scale photographs of Vancouver that were meant to accompany *Journey into Fear* (Figures 4–6), including *100 West Hastings*.



**Fig 5** Stan Douglas, *Rookery*, Burnaby, 2001. Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner, New York.



**Fig 6** Stan Douglas, *Impounded Fishing Vessels, North Vancouver*, 2001. Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner, New York.

Douglas has produced lush, depopulated photographs to accompany almost every one of his films, and critics and art historians have had difficulty negotiating their role and status in relation to his film work. The general consensus amongst art historians and curators is that Douglas's series of photographs represent a type of research or "site scouting" more common in film production. The Serpentine curator, Achim Borchardt-Hume, takes up a similar line of reasoning in the *Journey into Fear* catalog, describing the photographs in the exhibition as "preliminary site studies" that form the source material for Douglas's films (2002: 10). He argues that the still images in the show document "places whose local histories seem to exemplify monumental shifts in the recent world order: the collapse of Communism [Berlin], the end of the industrial Capitalist era [Detroit], and the rise of globalisation [Vancouver]" (Borchardt-Hume 2002: 8). When Borchardt-Hume moves on to a more detailed discussion of Douglas's *Every Building on 100 West Hastings* (which, at sixteen feet long, is by far the largest image in the show and the only one formatted as a panorama), he

does not miss a beat, continuing to explain that the image represents the globalized nature of contemporary Vancouver: "the cornucopia of shop signs advertising fare from all over the world suggests the effects of global forces converging within a localised situation," he says. "Douglas's Vancouver, then, is a site of transformation, ambiguity and uncertainty" (Borchardt-Hume 2002: 17–18).

There are two problems with Borchardt-Hume's argument: the first is a difficulty that exists in all criticism that positions Douglas's photographs as mere "site scouting" operating at the service of his larger film projects. Although these photographs may document sites that have inspired his final films, Douglas's films are rarely shot on location: they are produced in closed, highly controlled, fabricated sets in a studio.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, while the act of site scouting implies a hurried and non-aesthetic process of documenting spaces for their artistic use value, Douglas's images are definitely not snapshots. *100 West Hastings* must therefore be examined with the same specificity and eye to detail that is applied to his film work, rather than

being relegated to a mode of research or “site scouting.” As a tightly controlled image that closely examines the specificity of a particular, locatable streetscape, *100 West Hastings* is not one moment within a larger process of examining a plethora of examples of how globalization affects different cities; it is an image that references the broader issues of globalization that *Journey into Fear* meditates on, but through Vancouver’s particular, anomalous engagement with these problems.

The second problem with Borchardt-Hume’s argument is his assertion that *Every Building* represents a site of “ambiguity and uncertainty.” Set in the Downtown Eastside, Douglas’s photograph, as I have outlined, pictures an unambiguous and locatable place in the urban landscape. As urban geographer Nicholas Blomley has pointed out in his book about Vancouver’s gentrification process, “the place that is now the Downtown Eastside... has been produced in a complicated and fractured geological layering of material and representational processes” (2004: 32). Although the meanings that are read onto the Downtown Eastside by Vancouver residents may change throughout time, as Blomley’s book documents, they are definitely not “ambiguous or uncertain”: they are powerful associations that are informed by and rooted in Vancouver’s social and political histories.

### Catalogs as Instruction Manuals

When the same group of works came to Vancouver to be exhibited in their local context at the Contemporary Art Gallery (CAG) seven months later, the curatorial focus of the “Journey into Fear” exhibition, and its reception, changed drastically. Whereas the Serpentine emphasized the work’s relationship to the global forces of capitalism and modernity, the CAG prioritized the local specificity of the image.

Much like the Serpentine, the CAG is a free, centrally located public gallery that focuses on

contemporary artistic production. The 2002 exhibition of Douglas’s work at the CAG was based on the Serpentine’s show, but was re-organized by the gallery’s recently hired curator, Reid Shier. Shier chose to present only the works “about Vancouver,” which included *Journey into Fear* as well as the suite of four large-scale colour photographs of different locations in Vancouver. Whereas Douglas’s work was read by Serpentine viewers as representative of an international artistic development (namely the work of the so-called Vancouver School), at the CAG, the series took on an invigorated local significance for viewers who rarely get to see the work of these photographers in their hometown. Wanting to exhibit the same body of work organized by the Serpentine to a Vancouver public with a different emphasis, the CAG advertised the “Journey into Fear” exhibition by emphasizing the Canadian premiere of Douglas’s new film and the “Vancouver set location” photographs. Nonetheless, the catalog that was produced to accompany the exhibition focused exclusively on the photograph *100 West Hastings*. The 100-page volume features a curator’s introduction, three commissioned essays on the social and political history of the Downtown Eastside and a pullout, miniature version of Douglas’s photograph. Yet the *Every Building on 100 West Hastings* catalog is an unusual monograph in its emphasis on the social and political history of the Downtown Eastside: in fact, only one of the texts, an analysis by artist and art historian Denise Blake Oleksijczuk, directly references the image.

Oleksijczuk tries to place Douglas’s photograph within the tradition of documentary photography and brings out similarities between Douglas’s photograph and the work of Ruscha and Rosler (2002: 105). Oleksijczuk’s essay also points to *100 West Hastings*’ relationship to the local issue of the missing and murdered women from the Downtown Eastside when she observes that the “Journey into Fear” exhibition opened at the CAG just six months after Robert Pickton

was officially charged with murdering fifteen of these women (2002: 99). Oleksijczuk asserts that the photograph's impact lies in the fact that it forces the viewer into an uncomfortable perspectival position that "demands that we as spectators adopt a staccato-like act of viewing that keeps our eyes moving as if we were engaged in a frantic search for something we have lost." For Oleksijczuk, the things we have "lost" in this landscape are the women who may have ended up on Pickton's farm (2002: 109).

As is clear from this brief survey of the catalog, the focus of the CAG's publication demonstrates a move away from the Serpentine's linking of *100 West Hastings* to Douglas's broader interest in critiquing the effects of globalization, represented by the film *Journey into Fear*, to an attempt to draw out the role this specific photograph plays in the discourses surrounding the local issues of the Downtown Eastside. Advertised as a "monographic publication," the CAG publication used the monograph format to address a specific body of cultural knowledge (Contemporary Art Gallery, n.d.). While monographic publications are usually employed to examine a body of work by one artist in a fine art context, the *Every Building on 100 West Hastings* catalog transfers the "small area" or "single thing" being examined to Douglas's image, which becomes a catalyst for elucidating the local meanings and references in *100 West Hastings* that are entirely specific to Vancouver and which are essential to a full understanding of the photograph's exploration of the globalized city.

Although this socio-historical contextualization of an artist's work is a valid and even established curatorial approach, dedicating an entire exhibition catalogue to one image is not. Yet no one from the CAG explicitly addresses why the gallery felt it was necessary to adopt this strategy. In the "Foreword" to the catalog, CAG director Christina Ritchie observes that, "it rarely happens that an exhibiting institution such as the CAG will focus all of its energy and resources on the

critical exploration and elaboration of a single emblematic work of art" (2002: 8). She then justifies this focus by calling up the "depth and poignancy" of *100 West Hastings*, arguing that the monograph "seems necessary in relation to the artist's remarkable accomplishment" (Ritchie 2002: 8). The CAG's use of the word "poignancy" marks an important shift in the way the political impact of Douglas's image is framed. Common in discussions about the social documentary practices of photographers such as Jacob Riis, "poignancy" invokes a neo-liberal reaction to the "plight" of marginalized groups and communities and evokes a generalized sympathy for the "less fortunate" that works to obscure the specific, racialized and gendered institutional policies and systematic inequalities that create places like Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. While the CAG catalog builds a thorough and convincing case about the specificity and significance of the Downtown Eastside neighbourhood to the photograph and to broader discourses of globalization and gentrification, the way the catalog was promoted and described by the gallery staff, on the contrary, abstracts these subjects and instead focuses on the photograph's general affective qualities.

Explanations from the CAG staff shy away from the image's specific social and political meaning, which is, conversely, exactly what the catalog draws out. This discrepancy between what the gallery *says it is doing* and the work that the catalog *actually does* reveals a slippage that suggests that the CAG catalog was produced as a rebuttal to the Serpentine's reading of the image. The essays in the *Every Building on 100 West Hastings* catalog make what Borchardt-Hume saw as "ambiguous and uncertain," into something emphatic and decided. This prioritization of the social history of the area in the catalog also indicates a desire to somehow re-populate Douglas's image by personalizing the space through a discussion of the lives of the people in the neighborhood. It is a method of augmenting

the flow of global capital that the Serpentine's Borchardt-Hume sees in the image with what critic Clint Burnham has termed a flow of "human capital," noting that, "corporate practices are themselves attempts at managing human capital" (2005: 3).

The fact that the CAG's mediation of the image is done in a series of texts in a catalog, which is permanent, portable, and re-readable, rather than on wall panels, is also important; this is not simply contextualization for the viewer, but an instruction manual for other galleries and viewers on how to read this image. This instruction manual format also implies a seemingly paradoxical connection between the local and the global. The CAG's reclamation of *100 West Hastings* as a Vancouver-made image about specific Vancouver issues does not negate other readings of the image by other non-Vancouver publics. Rather, it points to a sense of place in a late capitalist, globalized urban landscape where local and global issues are linked. British sociologist Anthony Giddens perhaps best expresses this relationship between the local and global when he states that:

in the conditions of modernity, place becomes increasingly *phantasmagoric*: that is to say, locales are thoroughly penetrated by and shaped in terms of social influences quite distant from them. What structures the locale is not simply that which is present on the scene; the 'visible form' of the locale conceals the distanced relations which determine its nature. (quoted in Wood 1999: 120)

Douglas's picturing of the "phantasmagoric" place that is the Downtown Eastside therefore not only speaks to Vancouver's specific local issues, but also takes a critical stance on the global forces that have created them by depicting a space that has proven resistant to gentrification. The commercial success of the CAG catalog,

now in its second printing, seems to indicate there is a sizeable audience for such a critique.<sup>8</sup> The positive reception of the catalog locally did not go unnoticed by the City of Vancouver, either. When plans for the Woodward's redevelopment were officially released through a report published by Vancouver City Council in 2006, plans for an "interpretive mural" by Douglas that would depict "activity on the ground floor of Woodward's in the mid-1950s, which has been identified as the high-point of retail activity at Woodward's" were announced for the new building's lobby (City of Vancouver 2006: Appendix C, 3). Although no mention is made of why Douglas was chosen to create the mural, the report concludes with a simple statement obviously meant to reference the artist's past experience and suitability for the project: "Stan Douglas created the acclaimed photo-mural [sic], *Every Building on 100 West Hastings*" (City of Vancouver 2006: Appendix C, 4).<sup>9</sup>

By forcefully re-presenting this anomaly in the narrative of global capitalism to viewers, *100 West Hastings*, like many of Douglas's other works, also hints at the yet-to-be-realized radical potential of such a resistance. As anthropologist and art historian James Clifford has explained, with the emergence of feminist and non-Western discourses in contemporary art which offer a radical re-reading of dominant cultural narratives, a new understanding of temporality emerges in which the advancing world system of modernity is not merely challenged or resisted, but rather where new systems and paths through modernity are *produced*. Clifford writes that, in this new paradigm, "[n]on-western [and marginalized] cultural and artistic works are implicated by an interconnected world cultural system without necessarily being swamped by it. Local structures produce *histories* rather than simply yielding to *History*" (1987: 126). The changing curatorial treatments of *100 West Hastings* therefore signal a desire to draw attention to the critical potency of imaging the Downtown Eastside,

and, by extension, all urban areas where local idioms produce unique narratives of modernity and globalization in the face of encroaching international patterns.

### **Appropriation and Implication: 100 West Hastings as Commodity in the Global Market**

If *100 West Hastings's* critical potential is tied to a recognition of the geographic, social and political space it represents, then how might viewers' interpretations differ when the photograph is seen separately from the Contemporary Art Gallery's catalogue, in the context of the lobby of the McCarthy-Tétrault law firm? The Toronto branch of the law firm, which specializes in business and intellectual property law, purchased an edition of the photograph in 2002 on the advice of their art consultant, Jeanne Parkin, and on the approval of their in-house art collection committee. Their largest purchase to date—both physically and financially—the firm was interested in Douglas's photograph because it fit within an existing collection of predominantly Canadian photography with a strong emphasis on works by the Vancouver School (Jeanne Parkin 2008, pers. comm.). Despite the ways *100 West Hastings* circulated as an effective mode of critique at the Contemporary Art Gallery, Douglas's photograph operates as an example of fine art craftsmanship in the very different, semi-private, corporate setting of a law firm lobby. The content of the image—the fact that the neighborhood pictured is the Downtown Eastside—seems to have been ignored in McCarthy-Tétrault's decision to acquire the photograph. Instead, Brian C. Pel, the head of the art collection committee, emphasized Douglas's incredible skill as a photographer and described the artist's attention to detail in the construction of the photograph, which obscures any evidence of the photographer's presence on the street (Pel 2008, pers. comm.).

The firm's acquisition of Douglas's image seems to have been a success in terms of

aesthetic appeal. While some purchases by the committee had to be returned or relegated to under-used board rooms because of negative reactions by staff and clients, *100 West Hastings* has consistently been displayed in high-traffic areas and has been well-received by visitors and staff.<sup>10</sup> In fact, after a recent re-hanging of the collection, Douglas's image has been given the most prominent place available and hangs just behind the main reception desk in the lobby (Figure 7).

The commercial success and aesthetic appeal of *100 West Hastings* is largely due to Douglas's appropriation of techniques normally used in commercial photography and advertising. In every aspect of the photograph's production, from the total control of the street during photography, to the elaborate digital stitching required to make the image seamless, *100 West Hastings* uses the forms and tactics of dominant commercial forms of representation. As we have seen, the local context of the photograph is so nuanced, specific and uniquely local that, when combined with the image's slick commercial aesthetic, it can be easily overlooked by non-Vancouver publics. Without this context, *100 West Hastings's* aesthetic seamlessness, monumental scale and dramatic lighting might allow for the consumption of the image in ways that oppose its intended subtext; that is, as a celebratory image of global capitalism that manages to aestheticize even the most unseemly and marginalized spaces of the global marketplace. Without any obvious cues to locate the streetscape as a space of resistance for non-local viewers, *100 West Hastings* becomes unmoored: a placeless locale where Douglas's critique is displaced by aesthetic appreciation.

The artist Tim Lee, working in a generation that has come of age in the wake of Vancouver School photographers like Douglas, wrestles with the conundrum posed by the aesthetic appeal and political polemic of *100 West Hastings* in his essay "Specific Objects and Social Subjects: Industrial Façade and the Production of Polemics



**Fig 7** The lobby and reception desk of Toronto's McCarthy-Tétrault law firm. Photo: Brian C. Pel.

in Vancouver" (2007). In it, Lee outlines how Vancouver School images of the city's urban landscape use "a new-found largesse of scale—achieved through large-format commercial techniques—to attach its formalizing will to a painterly rhetoric and an increasingly politicized subjectivity" (2007: 104). For Lee, there is an ideological danger inherent in aestheticizing the poverty and disenfranchisement that have resulted from global capitalism because it risks being misread as a celebration of these forces. Moreover, by manipulating human bodies both physically and digitally, Lee worries such formal strategies might reproduce the conditions of production that are used to maintain this imbalance of power:

The fact that *100 West Hastings* is depopulated and void of human bodies is central in discussions about the critical potential of Douglas's image. On the one hand, we can read the dematerialization of human subjects in the streetscape as a critical mirroring of the active dematerialization of people in the Downtown Eastside; on the other, this depopulation of the landscape is essential to the aestheticization of the streetscape and its appropriation as a high

art image. By presenting an empty landscape, Douglas's image invites viewers to project their own desires onto the photograph. As art historian Abigail Solomon-Godeau argues, "photography communicates affectively, when it does, not because of its truth content, and certainly not by virtue of its explanatory power; but because of its ability to prompt imaginative and transference projections on the part of the viewer" (1998: 15). This transferral of personal desires and interpretations onto the landscape is particularly problematic when the landscape pictured is the Downtown Eastside, where issues of cultural and literal ownership are central in debates about the future of the neighborhood.

Perhaps more disturbing still is the thought that, for many casual viewers who are pleased with, or overtly benefit from, the effects of globalization and gentrification—surely many contemporary artists and viewers are implicated in these processes—Douglas's photograph might present an empty streetscape ideally suited for redevelopment. Cleaned up and emptied out of the troublesome human figures that could derail the benefits of globalization through demonstrations such as the Woodsquat, the street

in *100 West Hastings* is ripe for gentrification, awaiting the next wave of redevelopment and real estate speculation that drives the rest of Vancouver.

### Conclusions and Reenactments

Despite the dangers of inviting viewer responses which misread *100 West Hastings* as celebratory of the system it aims to critique, or which invite an affective and aesthetic response at the cost of historical specificity, I believe that Douglas's image might covertly operate as a social document with political potency while disguised as a spectacular and aesthetic panorama. While the public gallery viewers in Vancouver have the semiotic vocabulary and collective visual bank to be able to read *100 West Hastings* as a critique of local politics, and viewers at McCarthy-Tétrault do not, this discrepancy between readings does not necessarily de-value the photograph's critical function. Since the photograph's critique is founded on the viewer's ability to recognize the interrelationship between the rise of corporate and private culture, through the globalization of capitalism, and the decline of marginal and street cultures in areas like the Downtown Eastside, perhaps the lobby of a corporate law firm is one of the most effective settings in which to encounter *100 West Hastings*. In a strange irony, the acquisition and display of private property, in this case Douglas's photograph, intensifies *100 West Hastings's* demonstration to viewers that the social promises of urban gentrification and global capitalism are impossible to achieve.

The divergent interpretations brought to the photograph and its dialectical movement within the discourses around the effects of globalization seem to indicate that the recent history of global capitalism is still being negotiated and re-written and that the homogenization of difference and the elision of specificity are not necessarily inevitable. Rather, *100 West Hastings's* circulation and reception seem to reveal that there continue to be

opportunities for local structures to produce new, effective histories within the larger history of the triumph of global capitalism.

A similar conclusion is reached by Tim Lee, who argues that visual cues in *100 West Hastings* allow the photograph simultaneously to signify aesthetic appeal and political polemic. For Lee, the very format of Douglas's photograph—its seamless construction, erasure of the human figures and obfuscation of any evidence of the artist's presence—can be interpreted as a critical practice of exaggeration or over-identification with dominant forms of representation: an exaggeration meant to alert the viewer to similar ideological processes that drive global capitalism locally and internationally (2007: 110). By following a commercially inspired system of seamless representation and exaggerating it "in the hopes of revealing its duplicity," Douglas's image therefore draws attention to "an influx of disturbing processes...by making a spectacle of it" (Lee 2007: 107).

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### Notes

- 1 Port Coquitlam, British Columbia resident Robert Pickton made international headlines when he was arrested, charged and tried for the second-degree murders of six women who had gone missing from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. He is currently serving a life sentence for these murders, and is suspected in another twenty-seven deaths. See "Pickton gets maximum sentence for murders," CBC News website, <http://www.cbc.ca/canada/british-columbia/story/2007/12/11/bc-picktonsentencing.html>, accessed July 12, 2010.

- 2 I use the term “global capitalism” throughout this essay to describe current conditions of economic globalization which have seen Western countries move towards a service-based, exchange economy while the global South has become the centre of manufacturing and resource extraction. Importantly, the term “global capitalism” is used by several Marxist theorists to understand globalization as “a new stage in the evolving world capitalist system that came into being some five centuries ago” (Robinson 2004: 2).
- 3 My interest in examining *100 West Hastings* arose from my experiences living in East Vancouver and working in a government-subsidized childcare program in the Downtown Eastside while studying contemporary art at a Westside university. In my studies in art history at the University of British Columbia and my volunteer work in the public programming department at the Vancouver Art Gallery, the discussions I had with viewers about Douglas’s photograph were consistently informed by our lived experiences of the place he pictures. When I moved to Toronto, however, I found that this local context for Douglas’s work, and the work of other so-called Vancouver School photographers, was not part of the discourse around these images. The issue of how this kind of situated knowledge, as Donna Haraway terms it, might be translated through visual representations is one of my key concerns as a writer, researcher and curator.
- 4 It is important here to note that Vancouver’s street numbering system is unusually uniform, with each block using a range of 100 numbers that ascend as one travels east or west of Ontario Street (Vancouver’s east-west divide). The building at the easternmost corner of the 100 block of West Hastings, for instance, would be 100 West Hastings, while the westernmost building would be 199 West Hastings, with 200 West Hastings continuing on the following block. Block numbers in Vancouver therefore immediately communicate to residents where a building is located in the city’s grid system.
- 5 *West Coast LINE*, a quarterly journal published out of Simon Fraser University, devoted their Fall 2003 issue to a detailed investigation of the context and repercussions of the Woodsquat that provides an excellent account of the demonstration (see Woodsquat. 2003–04. Aaron Vidaver, guest ed., *West Coast LINE*, no. 41/42, 37/2–3, Fall/Winter 2003/04).
- 6 See Trevor Mahovsky’s discussion of non-place in the work of Vancouver artists in “Radical, bureaucratic, melancholic, schizophrenic: texts as community,” *Canadian Art*, vol. 18, issue 2 (Summer 2001), pp. 50–56; and Marina Roy’s “Adventures in Reading Landscape” in *Vancouver Art and Economies*, Melanie O’Brian, ed., Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press/Artspeak, 2007, pp. 69–94.
- 7 Of Douglas’s major film works, only three—*Nut’ka* (1996), *Klatsassin* (2006) and segments of *Vidéo* (2008)—were shot out-of-doors. The rest, including *Der Sandmann* (1995), *Win, Place or Show* (1998), *Journey into Fear* (2001), *Suspiria* (2003), and *Inconsoable Memories* (2005) were filmed on closed, fabricated studio sets.
- 8 See, for instance, Jill Mandrake’s review, “A block unknown,” *The Peak: Simon Fraser University’s Independent Student Newspaper*, issue 13, vol. 113 (March 31, 2003), no page numbers; and Robin Laurence, “Settling into Unsettling Images,” *The Georgia Straight*, Sept 19–26, 2002, p. 110.
- 9 The photograph Douglas ultimately created for the Woodward’s commission, *Abbott and Cordova, 7 August 1971* (2008), depicts actors restaging the 1971 Gastown Riots: a violent clash between Vancouver hippies demonstrating against a string of drug arrests and city police, some of whom had infiltrated the otherwise peaceful protest undercover in an effort to stop the demonstration. The incident, which occurred on the street corner of the Woodward’s building only one block north of 100 West Hastings, has been obscured from the city’s official history, with Vancouver police frequently denying their involvement in the violence. When the image was recently installed in the newly developed Woodward’s building, the public and police reactions to it demonstrated that the event remains an important and contested part of Vancouver’s local history. It is, arguably, the first time Douglas has used staged human subjects in his photographs and is likely not what the City or developers expected when they commissioned the image. See Fiona Morrow, “A night to remember (or forget),” *The Globe and Mail*, Thursday, October 30, 2008; Mary Frances Hill, “Beyond the lens, starkly,” *Vancouver Sun*, Sunday, November 1, 2008; and Shaun Dacey, “The Gastown Riot as public art,” *The Tyee*, February 17, 2010.

10 Pel noted that a work by General Idea and a sculpture by David Morris both had to be returned to their dealers' galleries because of negative staff reactions, while a series of photo collages by Ian Wallace has been hung in the smallest board room of the firm because it is not a favorite among staff and clients (Brian C. Pel, unpublished interview with author).

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