The Revolution Will Be Televised: Stan Douglas' *Hors-champs*

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review by Andrew James Paterson

Hors-champs loosely translates as "out of bounds," "off-side," or "off the playing field." More colloquially, it can mean "outside," "marginal" or "not in the picture."

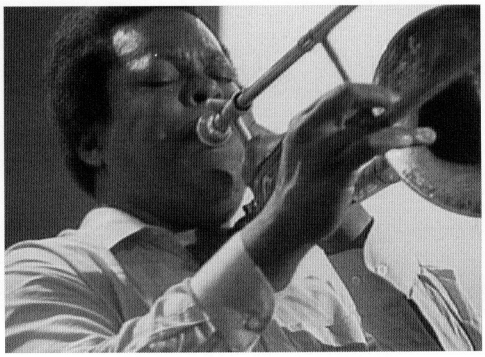
Stan Douglas' *Hors-champs* installation presents a performing jazz quartet documented by two video cameras. On one side of the screen, situated on a slight angle in the gallery's centre, is the edited "programme." On the other side is an assemblage of the programme's outtakes. These documented moments involve the musicians laughing and socializing with each other. According to video scholar and curator Peggy Gale, they "reveal the intimacy of their collaboration, their participation and pleasure in each others music."[1] Process, whether delightful, stressful or provocative, is routinely edited out of both entertainment and informational television programming.

According to Douglas' notes, *Hors-champs* is a recreation of, or an homage to, a particular mode of performance documentation and broadcasting typical of classic ORTF television (ORTF, or *Office de Radiodiffusion-Television Francaise,* is the French national network). He further cites the production and shooting aesthetic of Jean-Christophe Averty, a prominent television director revered in France as a prolific artist working creatively for the national network.

Hors-champs combines Douglas' ongoing interest in jazz and his fascination with the mechanics and languages of various television formats. The quartet performs "free jazz" or "The New Thing," a movement that was controversial and not necessarily popular in the late 1950s and 1960s. Free jazz was a general moniker or umbrella term loosely referring to diverse musicians including Cecil Taylor, Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane and Albert Ayler, among others. Free jazz never fit comfortably into what contemporary revisionist critics and scholars call "black classical music." Rather, this movement occurred relatively off-side, and then either dispersed or became further off the map in the early nineteen seventies, a period musically characterized by jazz-rock fusion and electronically amplified instruments.

Free jazz can be simplistically described as involving committed improvisation outside of conventional harmonic constraints. It is also frequently characterized by sophisticated ensemble playing, sometimes harmonious and sometimes radically dissonant.[2] Therefore, free jazz can accommodate both individualism and collectivism.

Free jazz has been virtually ignored or trivialized by revisionist jazz historians and practitioners such as PBS documentarian Ken Burns and classicist trumpeter Wynton Marsalis. This music has frequently been labeled angry, anti-social, militantly political (many of the musicians have never concealed their pan-African politics and values), self-indulgently religious (many musicians similarly made no secret of their faiths) and hyper-aggressively modernist. For many critics and historians, this music is also too closely associated with an essentialistic black nationalism of a specific time and zeitgeist — identity-based nationalisms considered hopelessly dated in this age of globalist capitalism. In



Stan Douglas, *Hors-champs*, 1992, still from two-channel DVD installation with sound. Photo courtesy: the artist and David Zwirner Gallery, New York, © 2003 Stan Douglas.

the movement's heyday, it was observed by critics and musicians alike that free jazz's audience tended to be (predominantly white) academics and bohemians, and that the music didn't register with black youth.[3] Within the assumed boundaries of popular culture, free jazz is definitely *Hors-champs*, or on the fringe. Jam bands and noise-punkers routinely name-check Coltrane, Coleman, Sun Ra and even Albert Ayler, but the invocation of these musicians' names is here intended to signify a serious authenticity in opposition to pop superficiality. In this digital age, free jazz may seem an analogue anachronism, although astute observers have detected parallels between a jazz musician's synthesis of composition and improvisation and a creative turntablists' blending of rhythm, melody, traditions and futurism into a delirious present tense.[4]

Douglas seeks to counter simplistic dismissals of free jazz, as well as its ghettoization in a very specific historical timeframe and location. *Hors-champs*, shot at Paris' Centre Georges Pompidou in 1992, presents these seriously accomplished musicians as sociable, interactive and televisually friendly. He presents this difficult modernist music as being social, communal and entertaining. Before reading the notes accompanying this installation, I would have situated the performance within a 1960s timeframe and not only because of the drummer's tie-dyed shirt. At first I thought the saxophonist looked like Ornette Coleman, and next I thought that the "musicians" must be actors, miming to a vintage recording.

The musicians are George Lewis on trombone, Douglas Ewart on saxophone, Kent Carter on bass and Oliver Johnson on drums. They are performing Albert Ayler's *Spirits Rejoice* (1965). It is a four-part composition consisting of a gospel-based melody, relatively brief saxophone and trombone solo-segments, a heraldic fanfare and then *La Marseillaise,* the military melody long deployed as the French national anthem. These four musicians are among the many jazz practitioners and artists working in other disciplines who have relocated, or been forced to relocate, from the United States to France. This particular path of exile has not been unusual among American artists, particularly those of African heritage. There is of course a cliched truism that leftist French intellectuals have traditionally appreciated American cultural practices that American audiences and politicians just don't comprehend, but that doesn't negate the fact that considerable migration has occurred. It also doesn't negate the fact that *La Marseillaise* is a key movement of *Spirits Rejoice.*

Free jazz was, according to Douglas' notes, quite popular among the 1968 generation; the many radical French students and dissidents who revolted against the American war in Vietnam and who believed in alternate economic and social orders to capitalism. Indeed, the French Communist Party considered the ensemble

interplay of free jazz musicians to be an exemplary social model, as this music, so often denigrated as egocentric and soloist-oriented, is actually all about sophisticated listening and an ability to choose directions collectively.

The fascination with the language of television in *Hors-champs* is shared by several of Douglas' other gallery installations, as well as his public realm interventions. *Evening* (1994), for example, examines the composition and omissions of the six o'clock news. His much acclaimed television spots utilize the semantics of advertising to subvert comfortable viewer expectations — what appears to be just another harmless commercial articulates a biting politic. *Hors-champs* recalls the performative origins of the televisual medium, when it did not feel compelled to edit down or eradicate performance, when "real time" was not strictly confined to reality programming and prime-time talk shows.

Hors-champs reminds viewers that the verb associated with the modern invention patented as television is to *televize,* which is synonymous with broadcasting or dissemination. This box need not merely squawk or cater to simplistic assumptions of "the public" and "public taste." The television — just like a radio with pictures — and in anticipation of other home and public exhibition formats, is an amplifier and transmitter, a conduit for presenting both select and general audiences with a performing art-form that can please both sensually and educationally.

ORTF is a national network, and national of course implies nationalist. The four musicians performing in *Hors-champs* are exiles from their home nation, and the final movement of Ayler's composition is the French national anthem, itself of military origins. Nationalism is an all too frequent cause of war, whether imperialist or revolutionary. But identity, or community-based nationalism is not necessarily synonymous with jingoism, xenophobia or separatism. Pride need not mean prejudice, let alone exclusion. However, national communications systems have been crucial to the building of nation-states and the maintenance of official or hypothetically unified national cultures. In *Hors-champs*, as a performed movement of Ayler's composition, expatriate African-American jazz musicians perform the French national anthem in a celebratory manner, but also in the process undermine the nation-state's pretensions to unity or sameness. Although the noted adoption of free jazz by the French Communist Party and leftist intellectuals might well seem problematic, within *Hors-champs* a transnational fluidity that defies notions of homogenous nation-states and absolute ethnicities is indeed at play. The quartet performing Ayler's original American composition have been at home in Paris for a couple of decades now, implying transcultural identifications. Twenty-seven years after Ayler's original recording, four racially integrated American artists are performing this seminal work from a musical canon, in a production conceived and directed by a black Canadian art star.

If, as Rinaldo Walcott has opined, in Douglas's work "jazz acts as a kind of covert and simultaneously modern "blackening" of his art in works that appear to be far from the discourses of race,"[5] then *Hors-champs* is arguably as much about what is outside the frame as it is about the discernible contents inside. *Hors-champs* went into rehearsal on 29 April 1992. Five days later, members of the South Central Los Angeles police force beat the crap out of detained African-American citizen Rodney King, provoking riots that spread well beyond Los Angeles. Thus, it is not only the televising of performing free-jazz musicians that could so easily be mistaken for an event taking place in, say 1967 (the Detroit riots) or 1968 (in many American cities after the assassination of Martin Luther King), or so many similar uprisings. Douglas dedicates *Hors-champs* to the people of South Central Los Angeles.

By effectively collapsing distinctions between present and past tenses, this justifiably renowned video-installation also focuses on immediate and long-term futures. *Hors-champs* might loosely translate as "out of the frame," which should not be confused with out-takes or extraneous footage. While the framed performance televizes ecstatic creativity and spirituality, what's happening outside the frame is the same old song and dance.

Notes:

1. Peggy Gale and Stan Douglas, "Evening and Others," *Video re/View,* eds. Peggy Gale and Lisa Steele (Toronto: Art Metropole and V/Tape, 1996), 363.

2. Ornette Coleman, widely considered to be one of the progenitors of free jazz, has defined the intentions behind his music and those of his contemporaries as "to encourage the improviser to be freer, and not obey" set ideas of "proper" harmony and tonality: "Let's try to play the music and not the background." Coleman quoted by Martin Williams in sleeve notes for Free Jazz, Atlantic SD 1364, Atlantic Recording Corporation, 1961.

3. Archie Shepp's album, *Mama Too Tight* (1968), addressed this dilemma by combining largely improvised saxophone soloing with James Brown–like funk rhythms. This recording predates both the early-seventies jazz-rock "fusion" recordings, as well as New York neo–free jazz, post-punk bands like The Contortions and The Lounge Lizards.

4. See tobias c. van Veen, "Fuck Art Let's Dance," FUSE (26:4, Nov. 2003), 12-21.

5. Rinaldo Walcott, "Blue Print for Resistance," *Money, Value, Art: State Funding, Free Markets, Big Pictures,* eds. Sally McKay and Andrew J. Paterson (Toronto: YYZ Books, 2001), 205.