

Projections: A Survey of Projection-Based Works in Canada, 1964–2007

*Doris McCarthy Gallery, Blackwood Gallery, Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, University of Toronto Art Centre
Curated by Barbara Fischer*

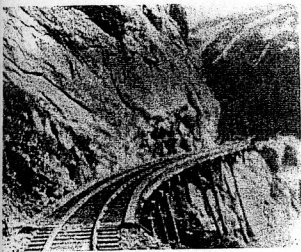
DAN ADLER

Much ink has been spilled about the current ubiquity of video in the international art world. There has been productive debate about how and why projected video steadily, perhaps inevitably, became a feature of the museum and gallery environment—the very institutional and market-oriented landscape that artists sought to subvert using projection-based media when the movement was in its youth. The process of institutional co-option has advanced to such an extent that artists often strategically adopt video in particular as a kind of default position, with little or no understanding of the medium's diverse and complex past. This amnesia extends from art administrators to practitioners and finally to

audiences, who are encouraged to bask uncritically in the seductive glow of video projections seen in black-box viewing spaces.

A handful of recent exhibitions have sought to examine the specific critical, aesthetic and perceptual purposes to which projection-based media have been employed.¹ The exhibition *Projections*, organized by Barbara Fischer, director and curator of the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery at the University of Toronto, makes an important contribution to this discourse by demonstrating the range and complexity of these practices in Canada over a 40-year period. Non-chronological in approach, the show featured both historical and recent works employing all manner of projection technologies and compositional formats. A truly rare opportunity, the show was only fully appreciated by those intrepid enough to view all portions of this ambitious, large-scale project, distributed among the University of Toronto's four main art galleries located on campuses in downtown Toronto, Mississauga and Scarborough.

The exhibition was arranged according to four basic themes: projected works that make use of the screen as an active force in the production of meaning; works em-



Stan Douglas, *Overture*, 1986, 16 mm film loop, black and white, mono optical soundtrack, loop rotation: 7 minutes

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

r The most important of these is *Into the Light: The Projected Image in American Art 1964–1977* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2002). Like Fischer's exhibition, *Into the Light* had a national focus and presented various projection media in addition to video, but it differed in its narrower historical scope. More recently, *First Generation: Art and the Moving Image, 1963–1986*, at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid (2007) juxtaposed recent and historical projected works in problematic ways.

phasizing the experience of light in projections; works explicitly dealing with cinematic forms and the architecture of cinemas; and works addressing travel and movement. The onus was on the viewer to articulate these broadly conceived topics while wandering through each of the venues: gallery visitors unaccustomed to this kind of art would certainly have benefitted from open-ended wall texts providing suggestions about how to contextualize and construct the often imaginative and impressive formal, conceptual and aesthetic relationships posited by the curator. (The exhibition catalogue is not expected to appear until this fall and the brochure material on hand made no effort to connect works, providing only brief descriptions of each piece and bios of the artists.) Accordingly, one was encouraged to rely—sometimes productively—on subjective taste and intuitive speculation while charting a path through the show(s).

Some interpretative guidance would have been welcome in Scarborough, for instance, when confronting three wonderful works that articulated the theme of travel: Stan Douglas' *Overture* (1986), Rodney Graham's *Halcyon Sleep* (1994) and Jana Sterbak's *Waiting for High Water* (2005). While journeying among these projections, one was hard-pressed to move beyond the simple idea that they share a conceptual preoccupation with giving up camera control—by using footage shot from the front of a moving train, from a stationary position looking out of a moving van or from the back of wandering dog. In this case, the temptation was to simply enjoy the metaphorical and poetic associations of each projection separately, on a predominantly visual, rather than conceptual level.

However, there were relationships set up in the show that were helpfully historical in nature, such as in the

spaces at the University of Toronto Art Centre, which included David Askevold's *Accelerations* (1971), Murray Favro's *Still Life (The Table)* and *Light Bulbs* (both 1970), Ian Carr-Harris' *Empire Piece* (1970–71) and Michael Snow's *Two Sides to Every Story* (1974). These examples and others served the crucial function of providing a remarkably varied selection of pioneering efforts to use projection as a means to develop new languages of representation that, among other things, critiqued the darkened space of the cinema—a place that normally inhibits the beholder's movement and circulation and where spectators sink into their seats as though they were slipping into bed. This spectacularized model of movie spectatorship was split apart by those employing slide, film and video technologies to make new demands on art-viewing audiences—whose attentions were redirected from the illusion on the screen to an awareness of the moving bodies around them and the surrounding institutional context. Artists' projected imagery was split, doubled, overlapped, extended over more than one gallery wall, multiplied with mirrors, miniaturized and enormously enlarged. Experiencing the disorienting effects of such works—exemplified by Snow's celebrated and much discussed installation *Two Sides to Every Story*, in which one circles around a thin screen suspended in the gallery, alternating between its two sides, always uncertain where to position oneself—was one of a series of powerful and instructive reminders in the show of the myriad perceptually and conceptually innovative ways that projection-based works once functioned to subvert the industries of spectacle that now permeate the art world more thoroughly than ever.

Michael Snow, *Two Sides to Every Story*, 1974, 16 mm colour film loop, 11 minutes, two projectors, switching device, and aluminum screen, from the collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

