

January 18th - February 23rd, 2019

# Hors-champs

Stan Douglas

Talk: February 16 @ 3pm  
Stan Douglas and George Lewis  
in conversation

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# Exilic Hope in Albert Ayler and Stan Douglas

*He's not the kind of man who should go to  
the army*

— Don Cherry on Albert Ayler

*One day everything will be as it should be*  
— Albert Ayler

*I feel great, until I get outside*

— Arthur Taylor

*Hors Champs is dedicated to the people of  
South Central Los Angeles*

— Stan Douglas

Stan Douglas's *Hors-champs* confronts the displacement and simultaneous fetishization of Free Jazz music, Free Jazz musicians, and even and especially the less conspicuous acts of watching, listening to, and collecting this music. The so-called Free Jazz genre comprises the most far-reaching and intimate work of Black American practitioners and inventors of Jazz, and it is more private and sacred ritual than spectacle, though Free Jazz musicians employ the spectacular when it is natural, when it feels right, when it is organically improvised in ensemble time. The first issue with watching and filming a performance of Free Jazz music is that you are either parasite or participant, you either contribute to or detract from the language the band invents spontaneously yet through years and even lifetimes of rehearsal and lived experience—all of which are supposed to distill cleanly into the spotlight, under the dim scrutiny of

expectation. There is very little nuance about the role of the Western spectator in a collective improvisation, and any collective of improvising musicians, though actively able to feed off of a good audience, even a good imagined audience, is ravaged by the typical hyper-intellectual crowd of wide-eyed and performatively underwhelmed statues in their seats, as well as by any camera that signifies that kind of audience.

We say Free Jazz but I believe we mean Black Liberation Music, or just Black Music, and the Black muses and trained masters of ceremony who give it its transformative urgency and place it into fluent conversation with the rest of the Black Radical Tradition. By fetishizing Free Jazz performance as many foreign media outlets did in the late 1960s and early 1970s, casting the music as some kind of untapped portal into Black intimacy and Black capaciousness that could be packaged for mass consumption, *Hors-champs* also shames the fetishizer, the unchecked nostalgia, the audience. The film accomplishes this by becoming an accomplice in the fetish-making, revealing to viewers the subversive in-between moments in the process of making the music—trombonist George Lewis whispering an idea to saxophonist Douglas Ewart, or Lewis closing his eyes and listening, or drummer Oliver Johnson drowsing between parts. The film focuses on some of the most spiritually complex and complete music by one of the most controversial practitioners of Free Jazz, Albert Ayler, a man who is ubiquitous

because he disappears, refuses showmanship. A man who we do not dare say committed suicide, or was killed, or was a casualty of his own capacity for intimate spilling forth, asphyxiated by his own drastically empathic swoon— his is no casual Black music, no half-hearted thrust toward freedom. To stage and perform Ayler's music is to admit that you are haunted, hunted, hidden in plain sight, ecstatic, sullen, into magic, and at times silly with bravado and courage, having so much fun it hurts.

*Hors-champs* is as much a rational study of shadowbeings, ghosts, haints, inter-dimensional activity that arrives as Black music, as it is an interrogation of how the dangerous ever-cannibalizing Western gaze clipped and eclipsed the wings of this music, made it a ruins, undermined its inherent collectivity with the cult of personality, and forced Free Jazz musicians into lives of fugitivity and surrender. Ayler's surrender/escape happened hors-champs, out of frame, and so a film featuring his music has to both exceed itself and resist completion in the way he did, if it is to conjure his spirit and not just imitate it. The composition the film features, "Spirits Rejoice," is explicit about the purpose of the conjuring. And Douglas's dedication, to the the people of South Central Los Angeles , who had just endured a collective and improvised rebellion after the Rodney King verdict in the summer of 1992 when *Hors-champs* was made, expresses the aim of the shared rejoicing. This is expiation, this is going outside

to get inside, breaking form to improve function, coming together to fuck shit up, maybe overlooking the fact that you are are part of the structures you're in the process of exploding, that if you are successful in rendering these structures obsolete you too will face obsolescence. Hors-champs revels in the space of this obsolescence in order to be its mirror, so that the irony of a film being produced with funding from an elite museum in Paris, and to be screened in museums and not on city walls, in turn being dedicated to black bodies setting fire to Los Angeles streets to protest their constant etat-de-siège, is alleviated. We can see if we look closely that Free Jazz musicians, Black avant-garde filmmakers, Black Radical artists and thinkers throughout the diaspora, and those engaged in rebellion in South Central Los Angeles, share the problematic intervention of the parasitic gaze always encroaching on and stealing our liberation fantasies, and that the dream of exceeding that theft, of entering the privacy of coordinated chaos, is our shared dream. *Hors-champs* is a study of some dreams we share and a move closer to their ritual realizations.

## The dream of going into hiding/Disappearance

Albert Ayler disappears into his sound. Then he disappears completely. He becomes horizon. He uncovers the spiritual value of being both invisible and the only idea we can see and hear for

miles. His love is war for miles. One of the last things Albert Ayler was seen doing, according to his partner Mary Parks, was smashing his saxophone over a television. They'd been arguing, he left never to return. The machine that transmits so many toxic and benevolent gazes and images would dent and maim Ayler's sacred brass as heart, the final gesture on record. Three weeks later his body would be found drifting in the East River and a rumor that he jumped from the Statue of Liberty, also expressed by Mary Parks, remains the dominant theory of the cause of his death. The first catalysts are the television, the deformed instrument, the doomed relationships that both reflect, the infinite approach of a critical and scrutinizing gaze and the insatiable desire to be released from the pressure of that shared back-and-forth surveillance, to experience the music in his head without being expected to translate it through the new machines. *Hors-champs* begins with fragments of bodies and hyper-masculine studio grunting among the ensemble, the kind that is self-conscious with hipness and intended to spike the adrenaline before a performance, or to contribute the mythic virulence of Black male Jazz musicians. Albert Ayler, who was soft-spoken yet messianic in his quiet confidence, is already missing from this din, and his absence haunts the players' efforts from this first and intentional false start.

## Dreaming in Blood/The Dream of Pleading the Blood

"Spirits Rejoice" is part gospel, part call-and-response, part fanfare, part Marseillaise. This means it is a fervent battle cry masked in a love cry. This means that all of the immaturity of nationalism and all of the immaturity of hero worship convene in a gorgeous echo chamber and testify something wise and vivid about saying yes. This leaves space for improvisation and also for uncontrolled screaming, a vocal and subvocal risenness. After smashing his saxophone into the television Albert Ayler is reported to have said my blood has got to be shed to save my mother and my brother. This was an anthem he reportedly repeated more than once. His brother Don was in trouble and his mother wanted Albert to intervene in impossible ways, she wanted one son to fix the other. Bloodshed was the consequence of impossible expectations. As in Albert Ayler's life so too in the LA rebellion. This legacy of impossibility shows up in *Hors-champs* as the simultaneity of two modes of performance. In some frames the musicians are alert and ready and deep in praxis, in others they are laughing and musing and waiting their turn in a liminal space not meant to be recorded. We see several versions of them at the same time and always the most intimate version disappears into professionalism before it can be codified, interrupting the spectacle of public testimony. If they give themselves completely to the Spirits

within the music it could be as dangerous as it was for Ayler himself. We're seeing not just the occupied dreams of Free Jazz as a movement but the occupied spirits of Free Jazz musicians as vessels who must continuously discover new ways to perform the music without being shredded and overridden by it, and to avoid being insincere in the process.

## The Dream of Embodied Living

Some of the best moments in *Hors-champs* are the furtive moments, the gestures we're never supposed to see, not because they function like tabloids on the song, but because these moments accomplish the opposite of gossip, they are whole-hearted wish-fulfillment, they reassure us that these men who we want to love because we love their sound, their intention, will survive this offering, that Albert Ayler's spirit survived his body, that the fugitivity essential to Black radical life will not just bleed out into obedience as Free Jazz confronts the wicked constraints and apathies of late capitalism, nor spill out into the war effort as violence in the name of justice. Since we are the music we play, our way of life has to be clean or else the music cannot be kept pure, was Albert Ayler's stance on his intended lifestyle. His pure highs reverberate in his tone and frequency, his lows do too, so that when George Lewis weaves his head with the music, when Douglas Hewart

begins jumping with poise and readiness during Kent Carter's bass solo, when George and Douglas nod in appreciative unison during Oliver Johnson's drum solo, each microgesture is a healing gesture, a mode of Black survival, the Black survival that must be put in place to outlast collectively performed Blackness or Freedom and its focus on commercial as opposed to spiritual survival. If we can catch ourselves in moments of unhinged and unselfconscious naturalness even as cameras are present, if we can remain embodied enough which is to say aware enough of our bodies, to improvise even as we're being watched and copied and exploited, then the gaze isn't as much of a threat, it loses leverage. Albert Ayler left his body, in search of a renewal of the capacity to be himself without impossible expectations, without the television, without the sense of duty that had began preventing him from maintaining a sense of self. The most subtle gestures of each improviser during *Hors-champs* offer us an alter-destiny in which we can leave our bodies in plain sight without becoming zombies, so that spirit and soul can remain in the body by forcing the body to animate on the soul's terms, so that soullessness is impossible.

## The Dream of Infinite Resurrection

Albert Ayler is nowhere to be found in *Hors-champs*, and in the moments when the music mimics a bird flying into a

concrete, prisonlike, wall or a man falling into November water and sliding its frigid surface in delirious exaltation, I picture him. He fills the entire space with his absence, he possesses each player with a reverence that makes them think twice before every improvisation, and he causes them to worry about their own progression into the heart of his song, about what might be found there and what could be lost or shed or caught in the limboing television waiting to be channelled, to be broken into fragments of itself and its notself. Ayler's invisibility, the invisibility of the people of South Central Los Angeles to whom the piece is dedicated, the clean and deliberate chaos of what is in and out of bounds in Stan Douglas's *Hors-champs*, gives the film an eerie inescapable quality, as if the players never leave its confines, as if *Hors-champs* and their version of "Spirits Rejoice" go on forever in a parallel universe wherein Albert Ayler himself is conductor and Stan Douglas is vessel. The sobriety of the work intensifies its haunting quality— why are the musicians so copacetic inside of this outrageous, urgent music? Why are the borderless borders so clean and angular? Have we given up the search for what lives beyond the televisual imagination so that Albert Ayler's immanence as absence is also erasure? Are the people of South Central Los Angeles ever going to see this film or hear this music? Does it matter? If the invisibility is mutual is it any less pernicious? In our legendary habit of not seeing what we aren't practiced at seeing are we missing the best parts? Yes.

But this yes gives us room to improvise our way out of the mire, to come back swinging and slinging our ghosts as spells on the open market.

## The Dream of Remembering our Dreams.

*Hors-champs*, by critiquing the naive and appropriative strategies of broadcasting Free Jazz and the damage those methods do to the musician, the spectator, and the music itself, also implicates broadcasts of Black Liberation Movements and the cultural workers who often help inspire them. The LA Rebellion is among those sudden jolts in Black consciousness that reinvigorate the Movement, and Albert Ayler is one of the cultural heroes who demands revolutionary thinking with his tone but also needs things to shift beyond just in thought, for his own survival and the survival of his sound. It is beautiful to watch "Spirits Rejoice" reimagined as it might have been within the world of self-congratulating Jazz documentation that circulated in France at the time of the song's release in the mid-1960s, yet that beauty resists itself through what haunts it just outside of view. *Hors-champs* reminds us that as long as we ignore our exiles and exilic gestures, no collective rebellion or embrace will have the stamina and purity of intention to resist commercialization or self-destruction. Stan Douglas has made an epic forensics of the practice of collective improvisation within Free Jazz, and its heroes

and survivors are the smallest most imperceptible gestures and microtones, the improvisations that arise like rumors, not the sweeping grandiose moments that we expect to attract the most attention, instead the sighs and flutters and nudges that cannot be consumed outside of their presence, cannot be stolen, cannot be recovered.

—Harmony Holiday

## Writer Biography

Harmony Holiday is a writer, dancer, archivist, director and the author of four collections of poetry, *Negro League Baseball*, *Go Find Your Father/ A Famous Blues*, *Hollywood Forever* and *A Jazz Funeral for Uncle Tom*. She founded and runs Afrosonics, an archive of jass and everyday diaspora poetics and Mythscience a publishing imprint that reissues and reprints work from the archive. She worked on the *SOS*, the selected poems of Amiri Baraka, transcribing all of his poetry recorded with jazz that had yet to be released in print and exists primarily on our-of-print records. Harmony studied Rhetoric and at UC Berkeley and taught for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre. She received her MFA from Columbia University and has received the Motherwell Prize from FenceBooks, a Ruth Lilly Fellowship and a NYFA fellowship. She is currently completing a book of poems called *M a à f a* and an accompanying collection of essays and memoir, *Love is War for Miles*, both to be released this fall, as well as a biography of jazz singer Abbey Lincoln.

## List of Works

### 1. Hors-champs

Stan Douglas  
two-channel video installation, 1992.  
Courtesy of the artist, David Zwirner,  
New York/London/Hong Kong and  
Victoria Miro, London/Venice.

### Artist Biography

**Stan Douglas** is a visual artist who lives and works in Vancouver. Since 1990 his films, videos and photographs have been seen in exhibitions internationally, including Documentas IX, X and XI (1992, 1997, 2002) and three Venice Biennales (1990, 2001, 2005). Solo exhibitions of his work have been presented by the most prominent museums in Europe and North America and a comprehensive survey, *Past Imperfect: Works 1986–2007*, was mounted by the Württembergischer Kunstverein and the Staatsgalerie Stuttgart in the fall of 2007. In 1986 he organized a touring exhibition of Samuel Beckett's media works for the Vancouver Art Gallery, *Samuel Beckett: Teleplays*, and in 2006 co-curated *Beyond Cinema: Art of Projection* for the Hamburger

Bahnhof, Berlin. An exhibition of work since 2008 opened at the Carré d'art-Musée d'art contemporain in Nîmes, October 2013 and toured Europe until February 2016. In 2014, Douglas created *Helen Lawrence*, a multimedia theatre work which innovatively merges theatre, visual art, live-action filming, and computer-generated imagery. Since the inaugural presentation at the Arts Club Theatre Company, Vancouver in March 2014, *Helen Lawrence* has been hosted by the Münchner Kammerspiele, Munich; Edinburgh International Festival; Canadian Stage, Toronto; Brooklyn Academy of Music, New York; and deSingel, Antwerp.

Most recently, he received the 2016 Hasselblad Foundation International Award in Photography. Other notable awards include the third annual Scotiabank Photography Award (2013) and the Infinity Award from the International Center of Photography, New York (2012).

Between 2004 and 2006 he was a professor at the Universität der Künste Berlin and is currently Core Faculty in the Graduate Department of the Art Center College of Design in California.