ACTIVITY KIT

STAN DOUGLAS

REVEALING NARRATIVES

For children, youth, and adults

Activities for families, schools, and community groups

PHI FOUNDATION
Hello! We’re pleased to present the Stan Douglas Activity Kit.

You will discover the photographs of contemporary artist* Stan Douglas, who lives and works in Vancouver, Canada.

This kit contains reproductions of works by Stan Douglas so you can take a closer look as well as creative activities to do at home or in school.

*What does “contemporary art” mean?

The word “contemporary” means “now” or “of the present day.” Contemporary is art created by artists who are alive now or who lived in the recent past.
In his art project *Penn Station’s Half Century* (2021), photographer Stan Douglas looks at the history of Penn Station, a train station in New York City that existed from 1910 to 1963. He explores its Beaux-Arts style architecture, with its columns and arches, as well as the events that took place there and the people who passed through it.

Douglas has done a lot of research for this project, combing the archives* for newspapers and photographs from the Penn Station era. He looks for stories and events that have been forgotten and left out of the history books.

Since the station is now gone, the artist recreates its interior architecture in his photographs using computer-generated imagery (CGI) technologies. He reinvents events that took place at Penn Station with actors from 2020. In the photograph on the left, Douglas has recreate the impromptu performance of a troupe of vaudeville* performers who were stranded at Penn Station due to a severe storm that prevented trains from leaving the station.

* Archives are a collection of documents (written, visual, audio) relating to the history of a community, family, or individual, which are classified and preserved for consultation.

* Vaudeville is a type of theatrical entertainment that was very popular between 1890 and 1930, featuring acts by magicians, acrobats, dancers, ventriloquists, etc.
Activity for preschool and elementary school children

Play with shapes, light, and shadows

ACTIVITY 1: SHADOWS AND LIGHT

As mentioned on page 5, the Beaux-Arts architecture of Penn Station included columns, arches, and lampposts.

Douglas loves to play with both geometric and organic shapes* in his photographs. Some of these shapes are created by tracing the outline of people and architectural elements, others by playing with light and shadow.

* Geometric and organic shapes:
  A shape is geometric when it is composed of straight and even lines or arcs. On the other hand, an organic shape is irregular, with fluid contours and no sharp angles. Many organic shapes can be found in nature.
Activity 1: Play with shapes and shadows

Materials: sheets of white cardstock, large black or white poster board, scissors, lead pencils, coloured marker, glue or tape, popsicle sticks, 2 flashlights (or phones with flashlight function).

Try to find geometric and organic shapes in the images on pages 6 to 10. Where are they?
1. Now that you have found the geometric and organic shapes in the photographs, take a small sheet of white cardstock (about 14 cm × 21 cm) and fold it into two equal parts.

2. With a pencil, draw a shape of your choice on the paper, inspired by those you have just found in the artist’s photographs. Draw a second shape on top of the first one, and then a third on top of those two. This is called superimposition.*

3. When you are finished, use a coloured marker to outline the final shape you have created.

4. Next, cut out the outline you have drawn. Then open up the paper to find the new shape you’ve created in the empty space! All that’s left to do is glue or tape a stick in the fold of the paper.

5. Your puppet is now ready to come to life in the Penn Station shadow theatre!

*Superimposition: Placing one image or object on top of another so that both are still visible.
Shadow Theatre—Collaborative Creation

Material: Train station set for shadow theatre.

We invite you to create your own large Beaux Arts style cardboard set, featuring columns and arches. The cardboard should be sturdy enough to stand on a table once the base is folded (see example on the right).

If you’re at school

You and your teacher will place the Penn Station set on desks in front of a bare wall. Then turn off the lights in the classroom and use the flashlight to create your shadow play. You and your classmates can create different characters in the station with your puppets.

If you’re at home

Follow the instructions for the classroom above, and invite your friends and family to create their own puppets.

Invent a story for your characters!

Stan Douglas enjoys imagining the stories of the travellers who passed through Penn Station. Who were their friends? Where were they going? What was their story? To bring your puppet to life, you can use the vaudeville performers in the photographs on pages 4 and 8 as inspiration for their gestures and movements. Who are they? What are they doing?
ACTIVITY 2: PLAY WITH POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE SPACE

Activity for students in elementary school, grades 3 to 6.

Go back to pages 4 and 5 for a description of the photography project Penn Station's Half Century by Stan Douglas.

Stan Douglas’s artistic process: Research in the archives of Penn Station

Stan Douglas did extensive research to create this photography project. With the help of an archivist, he went deep into the archives to look at newspapers and photographs from the historic Penn Station era to learn more about its people and events. Douglas is interested in forgotten history—the kinds of stories you won’t find in your history books at school. Here you can see archival images of Angelo Herndon, an activist for racial justice and workers’ rights, as he arrived at Penn Station.

Angelo Herndon
Image from “Public Art Fund Talks: Stan Douglas”
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ot-IOqAWxmeU

A crowd waits for Angelo Herndon at Penn Station
© Bettmann Archives
Reimagining suppressed histories

Stan Douglas uses the archives to visually recreate these events and the characters involved, but there is still a lot of missing information. He uses his imagination to fill those gaps and adds important new elements to the scenes.

For example, here we see Angelo Herndon’s arrival at the station, inspired by the archival image on page 15. Douglas has added red carnations to the steps, symbolizing the labour movement that fought for workers’ rights and strove to improve their living conditions.
Activity 2: Explore positive and negative space

Materials: sheets of white cardstock, 8½×11", large black posterboard, scissors, pencils, gluestick or tape.

For Activity 2, we'll explore these gaps in the archives and the invisibility of certain stories about Penn Station. We'll do this by exploring positive and negative space and the relationships between them.

Negative space is the empty space around the main subject of an image. For example, here the negative space surrounding the frog is black.

Positive space is basically the central subject of an image. For example, here the central subject is the frog, so we see the positive space is white.

This activity is about learning to see differently and to approach negative space (in this case white) as our central subject.

1. Come up with a vaudeville or circus character, like a contortionist, acrobat, dancer, or juggler. Draw the outline of your character in mid-movement or gesture on a sheet of white cardstock (8½"×11"). It is important that your character's body be open, with limbs extended in gesture or movement toward the edges of the page. Use the photo of the frog to the left and this sketch below as inspiration:
2. Then, using a ruler, draw a large rectangle around the character. It is important that the ends of your character extend slightly beyond this rectangle, like the example below:

Illustration: Zoe Compton

3. Now, cut out the negative spaces created by the borders of the body and the borders of the rectangle, like this:

Photo: Zoe Compton

4. Then place your white shapes on a large sheet of black paper. Arrange them into a composition you like, and then glue your shapes together. You can then glue your shapes together. See the example below.

Abstract composition in groups

5. In school: You can also make an abstract composition with your classmates. In this case, use a large black sheet of paper and work together with five of your classmates. You will create an abstract composition with your white negative shapes on the black space. The composition is how the shapes are organized and placed on the large black sheet of paper.

With family: Follow the instructions above for school groups, and do the activity with your friends and family.

6. Take time to move your white shapes around on a black background to create your composition. When everyone is happy, you can glue the shapes onto the cardboard. Your collaborative work of negative shapes, now the centre of attention, is ready to hang on the wall!
In his photography series *Disco Angola*, Stan Douglas focuses on two distinct historical moments in 1974 and 1975: the emergence of disco in New York and the moment when the South West African country of Angola broke free from the Portuguese colonial empire* and entered a civil war*.

**Disco in New York:**

In New York, the arrival of disco allowed marginalized* communities to find a mode of expression and liberation through music, dance, and fashion. Disco has its roots in music of African descent.

**Dancing in Angola:**

In Angola, during the conflicts for liberation from the colonial empire,* dance provided an opportunity for escape and a mode of self-expression. In the photograph on the previous page, rebel soldiers can be seen surrounding two comrades performing capoeira. Capoeira was created in the 16th century by West African people who were forced into slavery in Brazil by Portuguese colonizers. They developed capoeira as a way to hold onto their cultural traditions and martial arts.

See the reverse side of this page for definitions of “colonial empire,” “civil war,” and “marginalized populations.”
Definitions: colonial empire, civil war and marginalized populations

 Colonial empire: Sometimes countries send their soldiers to take control of other parts of the world by force. Places that are conquered in this way and then exploited are called “colonies.” European countries increased their prestige and power by taking the wealth and land of the African continent. They also claimed that their European way of life was superior to that of the different African peoples and used violence to impose their culture, including their religion, language, and ways of life.

 A civil war is a war that takes place within a country. It involves at least two parts of a country’s population being in opposition to each other.

 Marginalized populations are groups or communities of people who experience discrimination or exclusion based on their gender, sex, sexuality, race, or nationality. Discrimination is the negative treatment of people because of their physical characteristics, religion, culture, language, or way of life.
ACTIVITY 3: DISCO: GLITTER AND GLAMOUR!

Gestures and movements that sparkle and shine!

Activity for all ages

As described on the previous page, disco style, with its dance, music, and fashion movements, is an affirming form of self-expression and a way to resist anything that would prevent us from flourishing.

Activity 3: Create your own disco style!

Materials: multicoloured glitter sequins, gold and silver foil, glue, scissors.

Disco is about dancing in nightclubs and exuberant self-expression. Disco fashion is flamboyant and very flashy: brightly coloured clothes, shiny and glittery accessories, makeup in silver and gold, and even feathers! When you dance, these accessories move with your body and sparkle and shimmer under the disco ball and any kind of lighting.

Design your own accessories (like necklaces, bracelets, or fringes) and then create them with your gold, silver, and sparkly materials. Imagine these accessories on your moving body.

Wear them anywhere on your body, like your arms, wrists, or ankles.

Then gather your friends and family, turn up the disco music*, and watch your accessories shimmer as you dance!

*Disco music suggestions: Donna Summer, Diana Ross, Gloria Gaynor, Sylvester, Grace Jones.
ACTIVITY 4: CREATE YOUR OWN UNIVERSE OF DANCE AND CELEBRATION!

Disco began in the 1970s as an art form on the fringes of mainstream music and dance. For many minority and marginalized populations\* (see definition on page 24), the disco movement represented an opportunity for liberation and expression of self and community.

Initially an underground style, disco in New York became increasingly popular. Similarly, during the fight against colonialism\* (see definition on page 24) in Angola, capoeira was a tool of liberation and expression of identity for marginalized peoples.

Activity 4: Create your own universe of dance and celebration!

Materials: shoebox, paper, coloured pencils, multi-coloured glitter sequins, gold and silver foil, glue, scissors.

Imagine you could create a secret club where all your friends could come to dance and celebrate. How would you decorate it? What kind of music would you play? Where in the world would it be?

Design your own secret discotheque inspired by the underground clubs of New York in the 1970s. Include anything that might inspire you to create art or enjoy your favourite activities. Bring your nightclub to life by drawing and colouring your decor inside of a shoebox. You can also build your club using the Gather.Town* website and customize a virtual space to share with your friends. This way you will have a small archive of your own ideas and memories.

*Gather.Town
www.gather.town

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