

Disco Angola

The eight photographs of *Disco Angola* arise from a similar fiction as that employed in *Midcentury Studio*: they are the production of another invented photojournalist, who had divided his time between Angola and New York in the mid-1970s. Stan Douglas has great interest in this period, in which the massive changes in political and cultural territories after the paradigm shift of the 1960s were also met with global instability, as epitomized by the Nixon Shock, where the United States terminated its participation in the Bretton Woods system. The ensuing deregulation of the international monetary system, the global oil crises, and several global theaters of war are an unspoken backdrop to these photos.

Two seemingly disparate settings are contrasted in this series. Douglas researched and re-created the look of both settings by reviewing archival photos and creating period clothing and decor. The results are carefully constructed images that appear to be snapshots from each situation—“costume drama in fragments,”¹ in the artist’s words, with wider implications revealed between the eight photos and their visual associations. Firstly, four photos depict the early underground disco scene in New York (actually shot in the dilapidated Alexandria Hotel ballroom in Los Angeles), ahead of this music’s streamlining into the Waspish, formulaic mainstream product it would later become. The other four photos (shot in the California desert) portray moments during Angola’s decolonization conflict in 1974 and 1975, where Portugal had earlier released its colony after its own 1974 Carnation Revolution. Douglas originally linked the two coinciding histories by his association of the influence of African music on the early disco movement. However the links and counter-associations continue and multiply between the two different contexts, as they unravel through Douglas’s aesthetic play and connotations, where for example the Capoeira dancing by Angolan rebels in *Capoeira, 1974* is visually echoed in the *Kung-Fu Dancing* song and dance represented in the eponymous photo. Likewise, visual and textual references shared between the fictional narratives in *Checkpoint, 1975* and *Coat Check, 1974* enable a reconstruction of real histories to be simultaneously reenacted and reimaged. Thus the original situations in both contexts must be recast and become illuminated in a visual dialectic that not only reframes the settings but also makes clear the implications of these distinct contexts in Africa and New York as they have developed into the present. Further, the question of “what could have been” in each scenario is boldly presented by their mutual configurations. Both Angola in flux and this microcosm of New York in its infancy were fledglings for a possible future that might have led to something better, something perhaps more utopian and revolutionary, had it not been for some hegemonizing outside force imposing itself (the interventions of Western and Eastern powers in Angola, and the commercialization and gentrification of both early 1970s music and its urban setting). In New York, this resulted in a counterculture and its setting devolving into terrible music and today’s expensive, corporate Manhattan. In Angola, a twenty-seven-year war broke out, not unrelated to the Cold War crisis, with direct and indirect involvement by the Soviets, Americans, Cubans, and South Africans, resulting in the loss of at least half a million civilians and an unknown, immeasurable number of combatants, as well as the possibility of a far different African nation being annulled.

Commonalities between New York and Angola as depicted in this photo series arise both in narrative cues from the photographer’s settings and choice of subjects, and in

the waxing and waning of these historical moments within the shared factor of foreign elements flattening the alterity of unknown cultural possibilities, where, as Stan Douglas states, “things had been doing well by themselves.”ⁱⁱ

The photos also ultimately challenge the usually assumed veracity of photography as an indexical medium and the parallel constructions of history that accompany this supposition. The series also perhaps asks challenging questions about that which did not happen and was thus erased, from memory, from existence, from conceptualization. This is an inherently modernist gesture: to revamp, revise, and reimagine that which has not only passed but has been eliminated. Overall, the entwined narratives in these eight photos present, without any direct illustration and by way of comparison, that which could have subsequently been, and make allusions to that which could still be.

ⁱ Stan Douglas, quoted in Monika Szewczyk, “Midcentury Disco,” *Mousse*, February 2012: 54–65.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*