“Haunted Landscapes: David Hoffos’ *Scenes From the House Dream,*”
presented by Sarah Eastman.

*Scenes From the House Dream* is an immersive video installation by Lethbridge, Alberta artist David Hoffos. It features a darkened gallery, and miniature dioramas which are viewed through windows in the gallery walls (Fig. 1). The installation, completed in 2009, was the culmination of five years of work and is a continuation of Hoffos’ previous artistic experimentation with video, scale models, and illusion. The title refers to the inspiration behind the work; in an interview with Robert Enright, Hoffos notes that the “house dream” is a common, recurring dream about a house. He describes this dream house as a familiar space, which holds surprises because it is continuously changing and expanding.¹ Much of the previous scholarship on *Scenes From the House Dream* takes the dream as its starting point. The four essays published in the exhibition catalogue *David Hoffos: Scenes From the House Dream* focus on themes of suburbia, the home, the uncanny, and the exhibition as a dream space.² The role of domestic space has also been studied; in his article “Home Thoughts” Bruce Baugh argues that Hoffos’ work depicts the home as a kind of failed utopia.³ He writes:

> By making a miniature model of the stereotypical ideal of ‘home’ (modern, middle class, suburban, North American, two-car garage) and simply dimming the lights, Hoffos defamiliarizes the familiar, and introduces the uncertainty of not quite knowing where one is: of being not-at-home in being at ‘home.’⁴

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² See *David Hoffos: Scenes from the House Dream.* St. Catharines, Ont.: Published in conjunction with the exhibition of the same name at the Rodman Hall Art Centre/Brock University, 2009.
⁴ Ibid, 62.
There is a sense of displacement and dislocation in Hoffos’ work, which Baugh addresses when discussing the individual homes and domestic life depicted within the installation.

Interiors are a dominant aspect of the scenes. However, there is another prevalent, though often overlooked, feature in *Scenes From the House Dream*: the landscape. While almost half of the sixteen dioramas feature nature and the outdoors, the role of landscape in Hoffos’ work remains an open and unexplored question. In this paper I will consider the role of landscape in *Scenes From the House Dream*. By doing so I want to suggest that Hoffos’ work can be read not just in relation to the domestic space of home, but also in connection with nationalist ideas of ‘home’. In her book *Ephemeral Territories: Representing Nation, Home, and Identity in Canada*, Erin Manning draws a connection between ‘home’ and the nation: “… the home mirrors the politics of state-sovereignty, offering protection from the outside by condoning an ethics of exclusionary violence on the inside...”\(^5\) This has been the case in Canada, where attempts to make settler Canadians ‘at home’ in the land have been an ongoing aspect of nationalist projects.\(^6\) These endeavors have involved a complex series of interactions between continuing physical expansion and settlement, and shifting national symbols and narratives.\(^7\) Artworks, and landscape paintings in particular, have often been used in these nationalist discourses.

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\(^6\) See Eva Mackey, *The House of Difference: Cultural Politics and National Identity in Canada* for an in depth discussion of settler attempts to define a national identity, create connections to the land, and make a home in Canada. Mackey stresses the role of the land as a unifier, while also focusing on recent national narratives of multiculturalism and difference.

\(^7\) Eva Mackey, “Death by Landscape: Race, Nature and Gender in Canadian Nationalist Myth,” *Canadian Women’s Studies* 20, no. 2, 2000, 125-126.
With respect to *Scenes From the House Dream*, Baugh and others have asserted that Hoffos’ installation troubles the idea of home in relation to the domestic sphere. Here I contend that *Scenes From the House Dream* also upsets relationships with the land, and broader nationalist ideas of ‘home’. To this effect I will look at how two scenes, *C.P. Fail* (2008), and *Winter Kitchen* (2007), construct Canada as an uncanny space.

I first encountered Hoffos’ *Scenes From the House Dream* when it was displayed at the National Gallery of Canada between November 6, 2009 and February 14, 2010. Entering into the gallery was an intensely unnerving experience. The gallery was dark, and there was a single path winding through the exhibit. Eerie lighting cast strange shadows throughout the space, while overlapping soundtracks featured howling wind, tense music, and an intermittent, blaring alarm. Sixteen small windows, approximately 1 foot by 1.5 feet, were built into the gallery walls. Each window was at a different height, requiring viewers to stand on their toes or stoop down in order to see inside. Behind each window was a detailed miniature diorama. These dioramas were scale models which depicted a number of different scenes, including outdoor environments, suburban homes, and neighbourhoods. Old televisions were set up on stands in front of these windows, and they projected flickering figures into the dioramas, animating the scenes. In order to approach the windows and look inside, viewers had to contend with the television stands. The exhibition path itself was also infiltrated by ghostly figures (Fig. 2&3). Three life-sized black cutouts were placed along the path, and videos were projected onto them. These lifelike illusions

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8 Baugh, “Home Thoughts” and David Garneau “Nothing Never Happens,” in David Hoffos: Scenes From the House Dream, 29-65. St. Catharines, Ont. : Published in conjunction with the exhibit of the same name at the Rodman Hall Art Centre/Brock University, 2009.
created a startling effect. In the darkened space, it was easy to mistake the projections for other gallery visitors (Fig. 4).

Hoffos’ installation is often compared with 18th and 19th-century entertainments such as the diorama, panorama, and phantasmagoria. *Scenes From the House Dream* is perhaps most similar to a 20th century form of sideshow entertainment, the Tanagra Theatre, which used a series of lights and mirrors to project miniaturized images of live actors onto a tiny stage.\(^\text{10}\) However, unlike these earlier forms of entertainment, in Hoffos’ installation the projection mechanisms are purposefully visible, and even intrusive. The television sets both make and break the illusion.\(^\text{11}\)

In a similar vein, the dioramas recreate miniature landscapes, while simultaneously making their constructed nature apparent; mirrors and other illusionistic tricks are noticeable at the edges of the scenes. These gaps between illusion and reality create tension, which is heightened by the viewing situation. The windows, with their decorative frames and placement on the gallery walls, recreate a viewing situation similar to looking at a landscape painting. However, unlike many landscape paintings, the dioramas make no pretense of creating a seamless likeness.\(^\text{12}\) In this way, the constructed nature of Hoffos’ dioramas may disturb the tradition of Western landscape painting by creating an awareness of the limits and nature of representation.


\(^\text{11}\) See the essays in *David Hoffos Scenes From the House Dream* St. Catharines, Ont.: Published in conjunction with the exhibit of the same name at the Rodman Hall Art Centre/Brock University, 2009 for further discussion of the effects of the illusion.

\(^\text{12}\) W.J.T Mitchell, “Imperial Landscapes, In *Landscape and Power*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002, 13-14. Mitchell suggests that landscape paintings are often considered ‘natural’ images that merely represent what is there. He argues that this is not actually the case, and that landscape paintings are representations imbued with meaning. Interestingly, Mitchell further suggests that the land itself is ‘always already a symbolic form’, suggesting that illusion and reality are conflated.
Throughout the exhibit viewers are also placed in the position of voyeurs, peering through windows. They are positioned at a distance, again similar to the place viewers occupy in relation to traditional landscape paintings. However, in Hoffos’ installation, the distance between the viewer and the scenes is collapsed by the uncanny ghostly figures, and the threat that the viewer (voyeur) will be caught out by a projection which looks back. The dioramas also blur the boundaries between viewer and artwork. In *Petite Princess* (2008) viewers may be startled to find an image of themselves projected into the scene from a live video feed (Fig. 5). In *Scenes From the House Dream* the conventional viewing position is destabilized, and viewers find themselves implicated within Hoffos’ strange landscapes.

The larger figures that haunt the exhibition path, such as *Mary-Anne* (2005) (Fig.2) and *Absinthe Bar* (2004) (Fig. 3), are more convincing illusions, both because of their size and because the projectors are less intrusive than the television sets. However, on closer examination they too are revealed as artifice. Describing the effects of exposing his ruse, Hoffos comments: “What it does is make the viewers’ suspension of disbelief voluntary, not forced or automatic. It produces an ambivalent state in the viewer that allows them to enter and exit the illusion at will.” While viewers may move in and out of the illusion, I would argue that with the larger projections, this fluctuation is involuntary. Catch *Mary-Anne* out of the corner of your eye after figuring out the trick, and she again appears real. If *Mary-Anne* were a perfect projection, indistinguishable from other visitors, or if her illusive nature was immediately obvious, she

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13 Mitchell, “Imperial Landscapes,”16-17. Mitchell outlines the conventional place of the viewer in landscape art, which is outside of the frame and of the land. This viewer is able to watch from a position of safety, as they are outside of the frame, and are not implicated in the landscape. Mitchell suggests that this viewing position belongs to the European male, and that it, like landscape art, this position and the implied viewer, is naturalized.

14 Hoffos quoted in Enright, “Overwhelmer,” 33-34.
would not be unsettling. It is the space in between, that uncanny valley, that unnerves viewers. The ontological uncertainty created in *Scenes From the House Dream* has several effects. It ensures that viewers never quite have a complete grasp on what is happening within the exhibition space. There is continual slippage between illusion and reality. I would also suggest that this deep sense of uncertainty about the exhibition environment causes viewers to experience a heightened sense of concern about their place, or lack of place, within it. By disrupting the conventional viewing situation in both the dioramas and the viewers’ space, Hoffos creates an environment where viewers experience a sense of dislocation. This sense of dislocation is also mirrored in the content of the scenes.

*C.P. Fail* is one of many small dioramas in Hoffos’ installation that features a landscape (Fig. 6). It is one of the last scenes viewers encounter within the exhibition space, and one of the few that does not feature a physical home. Looking through a window in the gallery wall, viewers encounter a darkened forest, lit by a greenish blue glow. A looped soundtrack combines a train whistle with howling wind, forest noises, and chattering voices, which may belong to the ghostly figures on board the train. These effects create the sensation that something is lurking both in the woods and underneath the surface of the scene. Beyond the trees an old metal train is visible, the words “Canadian Pacific” written in tiny letters on the side.

The Canadian Pacific Railway, completed in 1885, was a major force in expansionist settlement projects. As a result, C.P. has been a central feature in nationalist narratives. It was

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15 Enright, “Overwhelmer,” 34.
championed for connecting the country, and was also seen as an important force in bringing the vast Canadian ‘wilderness’ under control.  

In her thesis *Wilderness Nation: Building Canada’s Railway Landscapes 1885-1929*, Elsa Lam discusses the railway’s involvement in settlement projects and an emergent nationalism. Two aspects are of interest here, ready-made farms, and the train itself. Ready-made farms were built from 1909 to 1914 by C.P. in order to help settle a newly opened west, which was now accessible by rail. The farms were reserved for Anglo-Canadians, and were developed to quickly populate the land. This project, though small in scale, highlights C. P.’s direct involvement in attempts to create a place for Anglo-Canadian settlers.

Lam also analyzes various aspects of the train, including its physical structure. Passenger travel was financially important for C.P. and from the beginning their advertising encouraged Canadians to take the train west, and familiarize themselves with Canada. Advertised as a comfortable journey through a rugged landscape, C.P. passenger cars included many amenities, the ‘comforts of home,’ and were built with large panoramic windows for framing and viewing the landscape. Train travel provided passengers with a contained form of adventure, offering views of a ‘wild’ land transformed into picturesque scenery. Lam argues that the ordering and containment of the land that occurred through the train’s windows made the

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20 Ibid, 63, 99.
landscape familiar and non-threatening to settler Canadians.\textsuperscript{22} C.P.’s role in the years of Canada’s emergence as a nation suggests that the railway, through its imagery, projects, and interaction with the land, was important in both physical and narrative attempts to make Canada home.

Looking at \textit{C.P. Fail}, viewers may notice something strange about Hoffos’ landscape; the C.P. train, a familiar sight steeped in nationalist history, is unnerving. Perhaps it is the mysterious gloom of night, or the peculiar angle from which the train is viewed. Seen from eye level, the train is obscured by large trees and almost swallowed by the woods. Hoffos’ scene differs from the heroic images found in C.P. advertisements and brochures during the first half of the 20th century, which featured aerial views of a railroad track winding through picturesque forests and mountains (Fig. 7). These images of trains cutting through the landscape reinforced C.P.’s role in the nationalist mission to ‘civilize’ the land. In \textit{C.P. Fail} the forest resists the train’s advances, creating a sense of unease.

The train itself is made strange through absence; the locomotive is missing. Only a long string of cars, without wheels, is present. Without the locomotive as its driving force, the train is stopped, immovable in the woods. This lack of movement is in opposition to images found in C.P. brochures, which depict three-quarter views of the locomotive in the foreground, set against a scenic backdrop through which the rest of the cars move (Fig. 8 & 9). Lam writes:

The railway was depicted as a civilizing force that had conquered the brutal mountains by forging a path through the seemingly impenetrable terrain. In aesthetic terms, the mountains were presented as terrifying, sublime objects, which were to some extent tamed into picturesque scenery by the movement of the train through the landscape.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid, 53.
\textsuperscript{23} Lam, “A Civilized Wilderness,” 52.
Movement, both of the train and as shown in promotional images, was important for transforming the land into picturesque scenery. This ordering of the land by the civilizing authority of the train made it familiar to British settlers accustomed to picturesque landscapes. In Hofos’ artwork the train has lost its power as a civilizing force, frustrated by an unyielding forest and a lack of movement. *C.P. Fail* is unnerving because the failure of the train hints at an inability to control the land and make it home.

The train may not move, however, the soundtrack associated with the scene repeats endlessly. In *C.P. Fail*, the scene is caught in a loop which both extends time through perpetual repetition, and suspends the scene by eliminating the possibility of a linear, progressive narrative.\(^{24}\) I suggest that in some ways, the loop mirrors the nature of national narratives, specifically the need for repetition. In “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation,” Homi Bhabha suggests that there is an ambivalence to national narratives. They must be continually repeated, reconstituted, and reaffirmed in order to maintain their hold over the national consciousness. However, the circular form of national narratives conflicts with the unified, sequential story that they purport to tell.\(^{25}\) Bhabha describes this as a conflict between the performative and the pedagogical, writing:

> The scraps, patches and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a coherent national culture, while the very act of the narrative performance interpellates a growing circle of national subjects. In the production of the nation as narration there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative."\(^{26}\)


\(^{26}\) Ibid, 145.
Repetition in Hoffos’ scene represents this split through the tension between the loop and the utopian national narrative that the train signifies. This overlap between the performative and the pedagogical opens up an ambivalent, uncanny space. Here, repetition is both inevitable and marked by futility; inevitable because of the loop, and futile because the train, with all its “civilizing” and unifying power, is not going anywhere. Through the loop, Hoffos’ scene alludes to the failure of Canadian national narratives, and in particular, the failure of the train as a progressive, unifying force. The scene also imbues these narratives with a haunting quality as they linger, perpetually present. In *C.P. Fail* the apprehension in the scene results from the strange temporality of the loop, and the unfamiliar landscape and train, which disturb nationalist narratives and ideas of home.

In *Winter Kitchen*, viewers look in on an empty room (Fig. 10). It is nighttime and a strange blue light, emanating from outside, casts shadows over the scene. Inside, the fridge door is ajar, creating a warm glow. The scene is animated by projected curtains, which sway in the breeze from the open window. Lining the counters and floor are fluffy piles of snow. The light from the fridge hints at a presence, while the movement of the curtains suggests that this presence may be the house itself. Haunted house narratives feature a house that comes alive, and *Winter Kitchen* breathes.

It might seem strange to call this indoor scene a landscape, but the boundary between inside and outside has been broken by the infiltrating snow. Ghostly birch trees in the background press up against the windows, poised to invade the kitchen, and further merge the house with the landscape. Hoffos’ scene disturbs the carefully structured use of space found in picturesque paintings and in the works of the Group of Seven.
In picturesque paintings, buildings and signs of ‘civilization’ are separated from the ‘wilderness’. These attempts to order space in 19th century Canadian paintings reflect nationalist desires to tame the land and were part of a movement towards defining a national style through landscape.\(^{27}\) The use of the picturesque, an aesthetic category from European landscape tradition, suggests that early artistic efforts to define Canadian identity through the landscape stemmed from a desire to recreate home (Britain) in a new place (Canada).\(^{28}\) Rendering the landscape picturesque also contributed to legitimizing colonial expansion, by presenting settlement of the land as an unopposed form of progress.\(^{29}\)

Control of space is also present in the northern ‘wilderness’ landscapes of the Group of Seven. In their paintings, separation between ‘civilization’ and ‘wilderness’ is often implied instead of explicit, marked by the absence of signs of civilization. The empty, untouched ‘wilderness’ that the Group often portrayed was a myth.\(^{30}\) To carry out their painting trips, they traveled by train, and many of their images were painted near the tracks.\(^{31}\) ‘Wilderness’ was not separated from urban life, but contingent upon it, to both define its meaning and make it accessible. Also absent from the Group’s paintings are Aboriginal peoples, who have been present on land for thousands of years.

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\(^{27}\) Osborne, “The Iconography of Nationhood in Canadian Art,” 165-167.
\(^{28}\) Ibid, 165.
\(^{29}\) Mitchell, “Imperial Landscapes,” Mitchell’s essay outlines how landscape art naturalized colonial expansion and settlement. Through painting and ordering the land, colonial power was both reinforced and naturalized. In Canadian picturesque paintings this occurred through the ‘taming’ of the wilderness, and depictions of settlement. See Mackey, O’Brien and White, Osborne for discussions of the Group of Seven and the wilderness myth, and Den Otter and Cronan for a commentary on the shifting meaning of wilderness.
The Group’s images of Algonquin Park, Georgian Bay, and the Arctic provided symbolic imagery for nationalist narratives. In doing so, the land, and northern wilderness in particular, became a defining feature of Canada. Discussing the Group of Seven, John S. Osborne writes: “... it was the work of Tom Thomson and the ‘Group of Seven’ which contributed most to the development of a national identification with a distinctive sense of place.” [emphasis added] As a national symbol, landscape art has been used in attempts to create an identity defined through the land, and to create a sense of place and a feeling of being at home for Anglo-Canadian settlers.

Canadian art has moved away from nationalist themes since the Group of Seven, and numerous artists have approached the landscape in novel ways. For instance, Liz Magor’s Cabin in the Snow (1989) critiques earlier visions of the Canadian landscape through the reification of a picturesque northern scene in the form of an installation (Fig. 11). Her miniature cabin, nestled in cotton batting, is surrounded by bars which make it inaccessible and underline the impossibly idealistic nature of such scenes. Artist Michael Snow has explored the relationship between technology and the landscape. His film La Région Centrale (1971) is 180 minutes of shifting views of an empty Quebec landscape, accompanied by intermittent, electronic sounds (Fig. 12).

Created using a camera attached to a rotating arm, the film presents a scopic view of the

32 Osborne, “The Iconography of Nationhood in Canadian Art,” 169.
33 While Canadian art has changed, the Group of Seven, and the land in general, remain as symbols of Canadian identity. In “Death by Landscape” Eva Mackey suggests that Canada as a country defined by land/northern wilderness is one of the most enduring nationalist narratives.
landscape which is partially frustrated by the disorienting spinning. Hoffos’ installation continues this kind of contemporary engagement with the landscape.

In Hoffos’ landscape, wilderness has not been tamed and brought under control, and yet, neither is it a remote and uninhabited place. Overgrown and infiltrated, the haunted house in Winter Kitchen blurs the line between ‘wilderness’ and ‘civilization,’ making the space ambiguous. And in its ambiguity, it is uncanny. Haunted houses are one of the main instances of the uncanny named by Freud. In these places, the familiar and unfamiliar converge in a home made strange by the return of the repressed. But what returns in Winter Kitchen?

Stephen Turner has argued that settlement is a type of forgetting, though perhaps an incomplete form. His concepts of forgetting and the settler unconscious may be useful for thinking about Winter Kitchen, which I suggest can be read not only as a haunted house, but as a scene that portrays Canada as a haunted space. Turner writes:

...difficult processes of settlement are forgotten... The colonising desire of settlement, always mediated by local others, thus produces the settler unconscious, a site of unassimilable history, and a response to separation and disorientation.

Turner argues that a sense of disorientation informs the settler unconscious, which has been created through a process of forgetting. For British settlers, forging an identity in Canada necessitated several forms of forgetting. In order to make Canada home, settlers needed to collectively forget the settlement process. They also needed to forget or deny that the land they

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were settling was inhabited by Aboriginal peoples.\textsuperscript{39} This is not to say that Anglo-Canadians completely forgot settlement; instead, forgetting took the form of national narratives which naturalized settler presence to the point that Canada became ‘home’. This continues today since, as Turner writes: “Settlers do not think they are immigrants, or conceive of their culture as diasporic, and prefer to think they are indigenous, while distinguishing themselves from aboriginal people...”\textsuperscript{40} Creating ties to the land has been an important aspect of the settlement process, and has involved working to deny both the inherent disconnection with the land and the sense of displacement that results from settlement.

In \textit{Winter Kitchen} home's double meaning refers to and disrupts, both domestic and nationalist conceptions of space through the depiction of the house as a landscape with porous boundaries. In Hoffos’ scene, the infiltrating forest is disorienting, as it transforms the mundane, familiar home into something strange. Some of what has been surmounted in the process of settlement returns, namely a sense of displacement and of ‘not being at home.’ This space is haunted by the reemergence of a settler unconscious. The transgression enacted by the snow is also important; nation and home are defined by carefully maintained boundaries, and the disruption of these boundaries is unsettling.\textsuperscript{41} What lies below the surface in \textit{Winter Kitchen} is a profound sense of discomfort and a deeply unsettled relationship with a land that fails to be controlled, delineated and made home.

Landscape takes on a different form in \textit{Scenes From the House Dream}. Features of the installation environment and technology including lighting, sound, video projections, and angles of view, work together to create an immersive, disorienting experience. When combined with the subject matter in \textit{C.P. Fail} and \textit{Winter Kitchen}, these effects render Canada a strange place:

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid, 21.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid, 22.
\textsuperscript{41} Manning, “Introduction,” xv-xvii.
ambiguous, haunted by nationalist myths, and tenuously inhabited. This is a departure from earlier glorifications of the landscape which have appeared in Anglo-Canadian art and in national narratives. Hoffos’ scenes move away from landscape conventions and unifying nationalist themes, and in doing so, they trouble nationalist ideas about home. In *Scenes From the House Dream*, being ‘at home’ is disrupted through a rendering of the Canadian landscape as an uncanny, haunted space.

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Appendix 1: Images


Figure 4: Installation video. David Hoffos, *Scenes From the House Dream*, 2009.  
http://davidhoffos.com/video/scenes12.mp4

Figure 5: David Hoffos, *Petite Princess*, 2008, single-channel live video, and mixed media installation.  
http://davidhoffos.com/?page_id=10# “Scenes From the House Dream” section, bottom row.

Figure 6: David Hoffos, *C.P. Fail*, 2008, single-channel video, audio, and mixed media installation.  
http://davidhoffos.com/?page_id=10# “Scenes From the House Dream” section, bottom row.

Figure 7: Menu Cover: The Spiral Tunnels, Canadian Pacific Railway, 1925.  

Figure 8: Poster: Canadian Pacific Steamers, Canadian Pacific Railway, Cyrus Cuneo 1911.  

Figure 9: Poster: Travel “The Canadian”, Canadian Pacific Railway, Roger Couillard 1955.  

Figure 10: David Hoffos, *Winter Kitchen*, 2007, single-channel video, audio, and mixed media installation.  

Figure 11: Liz Magor, *Cabin in the Snow*, 1989, mixed media installation.  
http://catrionajeffries.com/artists/liz-magor/works/#74

Figure 12: Michael Snow, *La Région Centrale*, 1971, 16mm colour film, 180 minutes.  
http://www.cfmdc.org/node/1154