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City of Glass

TOM VANDERBILT ON DOUG AITKEN AT MoMA

THE IMPLICATIONS of the glass-curtain wall for both cinema and architecture were delightfully suggested in Jacques Tati's monumental *Playtime* (1967), a film shot in wildly expansive, stunningly deep-focused 70 mm—critic Jonathan Rosenbaum argues that this was Tati's vision of the *shape* of contemporary life—and which took as one of its central characters modernism itself. No doubt inspired by Paris's edge-city La Défense development begun a few years earlier, the film's exorbitant set (dubbed "Tativille") features buildings comprising a wilderness of mirrors and windows through which Tati's human figures (mostly tourists, aptly) struggle to navigate, crossing one another's paths but somehow failing to connect. We see a workman asking a building security guard for a light, not realizing that a clear wall stands between them; we see the old city, the "Paris" of Eiffel, visible only as the fleeting, distant reflection of a glass door opening in the right light; we peer into ground-floor apartments whose windows frame inhabitants like images on television (which, of course, these tenants are watching). In *Playtime* building facades become both lens and screen, often at once, as when Tati's hapless Monsieur Hulot, lost in liminal space, finds himself unable to distinguish between an object and its reflection, between interior and exterior. The new transparency of modern architecture, Tati seemed to be hinting, might serve more as a distancing mechanism.

Flash forward nearly half a century. We have been living with the dizzying perspectives of Tativille for most, if not all, of our lives. The glass curtain has been internalized, made metaphorical. The showroom-apartment dwellers of *Playtime* have morphed into characters on reality shows. The city pulses with even more tourists, even more information. Data packets from other time zones whisk through glass walls. We try to avoid missed connections with social-networking software and locational GPS. Snapping photographs with our cell phones, forwarding them to friends, we have reached the point where our own images now move faster than we do (as the past nips at the heels of the future). And yet, despite all this, or because of it, there is still an abundance of what might be called Hulot moments, in which we find ourselves temporarily out of joint with the city around us, where we lose ourselves in a thought that is remembered only later, where an unexpected event forces us from our intended path and into unfamiliar



Doug Aitken, *Sleepwalkers*, 2007, Museum of Modern Art exterior, New York. Photo: Fred Charles. Rendering: Doug Aitken Studio.

terrain, where illusion and reality bleed together in a slow dissolve.

In many ways, this elusive experience of modernity is the subject of Doug Aitken's *Sleepwalkers*, 2007, a public work cosponsored by New York's Creative Time and the Museum of Modern Art, whose exterior walls of glass and granite play host to the piece's massive film projections this month. Indeed, comprising a series of loosely interlinked narratives that follow five characters throughout the course of somnambulant urban journeys, the artwork was conceived by Aitken years ago when he had a Hulot-like moment of his own, walking in midtown Manhattan late at night after dinner with friends. "I looked up and started to become aware and impressed by how vertical the space was," he recalls in his New York studio. "I'd lived in Manhattan but never thought about it. I found myself looking at the space, the time of night, the time of year, and had the feeling of suddenly moving from a very social environment to a very isolating one." But what if those mute slabs that surrounded Aitken on his late-night walk actually had something to say? What if, beyond looking into windows at empty still lives of after-hours offices, one saw stories reflected—projected—back? Whose stories would they be? Would they have a beginning and an ending? Accordingly, *Sleepwalkers* in its narrative structure plays with the

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fragmentary nature of the city, where any block holds multitudes of stories weaving in and out of view, and where any single route might cross untold numbers of these stories, a human network even more complex than the city's obscured veins of infrastructure. This is what Aitken calls the "broken screen," the attempt to render reality outside the devices of linear narrative. For the viewer on the street, *Sleepwalkers* provides a kind of amplification of his or her transitory urban life: The screens follow no set schedule as to what will show where and in what order. "Ideally, it would be a piece that doesn't have a duration," says Aitken. "Someone can pull up, double-park, see something, and take that concept away—as much as someone who wants to stand there for a half an hour and get lost."

Audiences familiar with Aitken's work will recognize thematic echoes here of previous works such as *Electric Earth*, 1999, or *The Moment*, 2004—dream states, nonlinear stories, the merging of the body with the larger or hidden systems that surround us, random connections and dislocations across time and space. His benchmark piece, *These Restless Minds*, 1998, features auctioneers walking (or drifting, more accurately) through empty urban architectural spaces—intercut