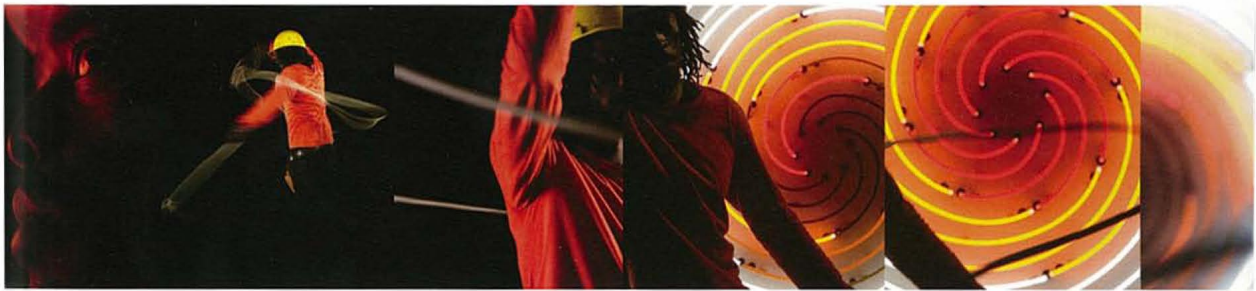


ArtReview

FEATURE

Doug Aitken

Still from *sleepwalkers*.
Courtesy Doug Aitken Studio



**'EVERYBODY REMEMBERS THE CITY.
SOME PEOPLE THE CITY REMEMBERS.'**

So says Colson Whitehead in *The Colossus of New York* (2003), an extended prose poem that traverses the epic psychological and physical terrain of his birthplace. Of course, even the elegance of Whitehead's statement doesn't mitigate its underlying message: New York is a tough town, one that is rarely impressed. And when it comes to what usually passes for 'public art', the lack of interest that New Yorkers often display – if only to stay focused upon making it to wherever it is that they are going – can rocket to superhuman levels. For further explanation, we could turn to dance critic Edwin Denby's breathtaking essay 'Dancers, Buildings and People in the Streets' (1965): 'So much is happening inside one, one's private excitements and responsibilities, one can't find the energy to watch strangers passing by, or the architecture or the weather around; one feels there is a use in getting to the place one is headed for and doing something or other there.' To repeat: it's a tough town. But it's not always impossible, and it remains more than worth the trouble.

Even with all of the above in mind, I'm surprised that my first glimpses of Doug Aitken's plans to take on Midtown Manhattan stopped me dead in my tracks. Last January, during a visit to his Westside Los Angeles studio, Aitken introduced the objective of what was at the time an unnamed project: to make the buildings of the city come alive. Now aptly named *sleepwalkers*, from the start it has been a colossal project in both size and spirit, and there is a real chance that it could be — in the most lifelike terms imaginable, despite its enormity — the saving grace of its host, the Museum of Modern Art. Recently Roberta Smith spoke truth to power in her comparison in *The New York Times* of the 'rightness' of Tate Modern with the 'wrongness' of MoMA: 'In a sense, trophy museums like MoMA are telling us all to get lost. Their design aims to impress rich collectors and, in fact, they feel rather like some rich collectors' houses: angular, fragile and clueless about how daily life is really lived, much less how art actually happens.' With his desire to wrap the museum with the realities (and the fantasies) of daily life in the most extraordinary of ways, Aitken has given himself a goal worthy of a superhero. The question, of course, is whether his spectacular project will make MoMA once again feel like home.

In a recent issue of *Vanity Fair*, Aitken told A.M. Homes about how the idea behind the project came to him in a vision: 'I was walking down an avenue alone in the early morning, looking up at the skyscrapers, and wanted to see them animated, in conversation with each other.' When he told me about it almost a year ago I was instantly hooked, if only because of the like-minded *fête* that I often felt compelled to perform on the empty streets of Midtown Manhattan in the middle of the night, a compulsion fuelled very much by a desire to see and/or feel any residual energy of the frenzy of the day in the (relative) stillness and silence of the night; or conversely, to take advantage of what at least seemed like a tangible opportunity to refill the waiting and available emptiness with all of the alienation accumulated during all of the moments spent as part of the crowds swimming or swarming up and down the avenues. Most of my wanderings took place in the late 1980s, when I was, as it happens, employed at MoMA, a connection that explains why the site of Aitken's intervention hits home for me — although I'm convinced that anyone who is devoted to modern art, even if he or she has never lived in New York, always takes MoMA very personally, despite its monumental status. Not unlike Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Aitken's *sleepwalkers* will be set into motion using complicated and even extreme means to make a fundamentally human connection.

The structure of *sleepwalkers* is necessarily ambitious and complex: ongoing sequences of what is a deliberately non-linear film are to be projected onto seven exterior walls, all but one a part of MoMA's facade (four enclosed by the Sculpture Garden, one at the entrance on 53rd Street and the remaining two on the west side of the museum, one of which will actually land on the adjoining American Folk Art Museum). All will be visible from the street, making it possible (and particularly meaningful) to experience the work without paying an admission fee. Aitken hopes that the building will seem as if it has been turned inside out, its encasement of a particular type of social interaction (in which the public becomes private, and vice versa, for example; in the experience of being alone with art while surrounded by others) reflected in the serendipity of the interplay created by the movement of the work across all seven screens (some of which will be

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this page: Stills from *sleepwalkers*.
Courtesy Doug Aitken Studio

facing page, from top: Installation views
by Fred Charles, courtesy Creative Time,
and Doug Aitken Studio



IT IS A COLOSSAL PROJECT THAT COULD BE
THE SAVING GRACE OF ITS HOST, MOMA

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installed on the translucent glass curtain-walls of the museum, effectively incorporating the 'interior' audience into the 'exterior' experience of the work). Interweaving separate yet similarly structured films of a day in the life of five diverse city-dwellers, each starting with their waking moments and morning rituals, and ending in what promises to be a shape-shifting yet far from alienating abstraction (when I last visited Aitken in November, most of what was ready to see were segments from the beginning and/or middle of each film, so I'm speculating a bit about the rest), they collectively move from solitude to being surrounded by others. (Again, Edwin Denby on New York: "You can see everything in the world here in isolated examples at least, peculiar characters or people who are for the moment you see them peculiar. And everybody is quite peculiar now and then. Not to mention how peculiar anybody can be at home.") With a cast comprising Donald Sutherland, Tilda Swinton, Chan Marshall (Cat Power), Ryan Donowho and Seu Jorge, the unnamed characters range from a high-level businessman and a mid-level businesswoman to a postal worker, a street drummer and a maintenance worker responsible for the upkeep of the neon signs of Times Square. The connections between the five will be fluid yet ever present, a disjunctive yet stabilising presence that has been in Aitken's work to some extent from the start, especially in key works like *Electric Earth* (1999), in which what first seem to be straightforward scenes of a lone young man wandering L.A.'s empty streets at night become something far more complex as night suddenly becomes day, out of sequence yet somehow visually seamless and psychologically saturated. Such a matrix is set to be reinforced in *sleepwalkers* by the layered formal circumstances of many of the locations at which the films were shot, from the central sorting facility of the post office to the literally behind-the-text web of the backsides of the signs of Times Square. Aitken told me that he sees the form of the work as a "sphere" with a surface upon which five individuals lead separate and fleeting lives that are revealed to be interconnected in and stabilised by the global "core" of the work itself: for example, the moments of waking up each day that we all share.

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It is remarkable to discover that *sleepwalkers* is Aitken's first large-scale public project in the United States (jointly produced, it should be noted, with Creative Time, a New York-based non-profit organisation unrivalled in its ability to pull off significant public projects with artists), and it seems likely to be the most significant accomplishment yet of his nearly 15-year career, one that was rapidly loaded with major works flung far and wide. It is also quite clear that it has what it takes to become precisely the kind of social and technical mediation that the still-recent version of MoMA needs to re-establish a meaningful relationship to its

public and the city at large. It comes as no surprise, then, that the project was first announced at MoMA last July by none other than Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who, as savvy as anyone when it comes to art, the public and the bottom line, set the bar high: "We've seen great art bring people out of hibernation, and so our administration has always looked for bold initiatives in the winter months, when tourism is at its slowest, to attract visitors to our city."

Notwithstanding the necessary goals of tourism, and while fully mesmerised by some of the rough footage at his studio, I told Aitken that for me the best possible thing that could happen during the run of his project would be a full-blown snowstorm. Unless you are trying to leave the city, New York City blizzards are a dream in the ways in which they quiet things down both visually and aurally, while at the same time almost magically reorienting the social activity that never goes away: people trudging up the middle of the stilled streets to go to the dinner party or the movie that wasn't cancelled because, of course, we're talking about New Yorkers. Snow or not, and even though I've been displaced from New York to Los Angeles for more than a decade, I'm sure that when I return to the city to witness *sleepwalkers* in the flesh, it'll make New York feel more like home than it has for a long time. ■

Doug Aitken: *sleepwalkers* is at MoMA, New York (www.moma.org), 16 January – 12 February