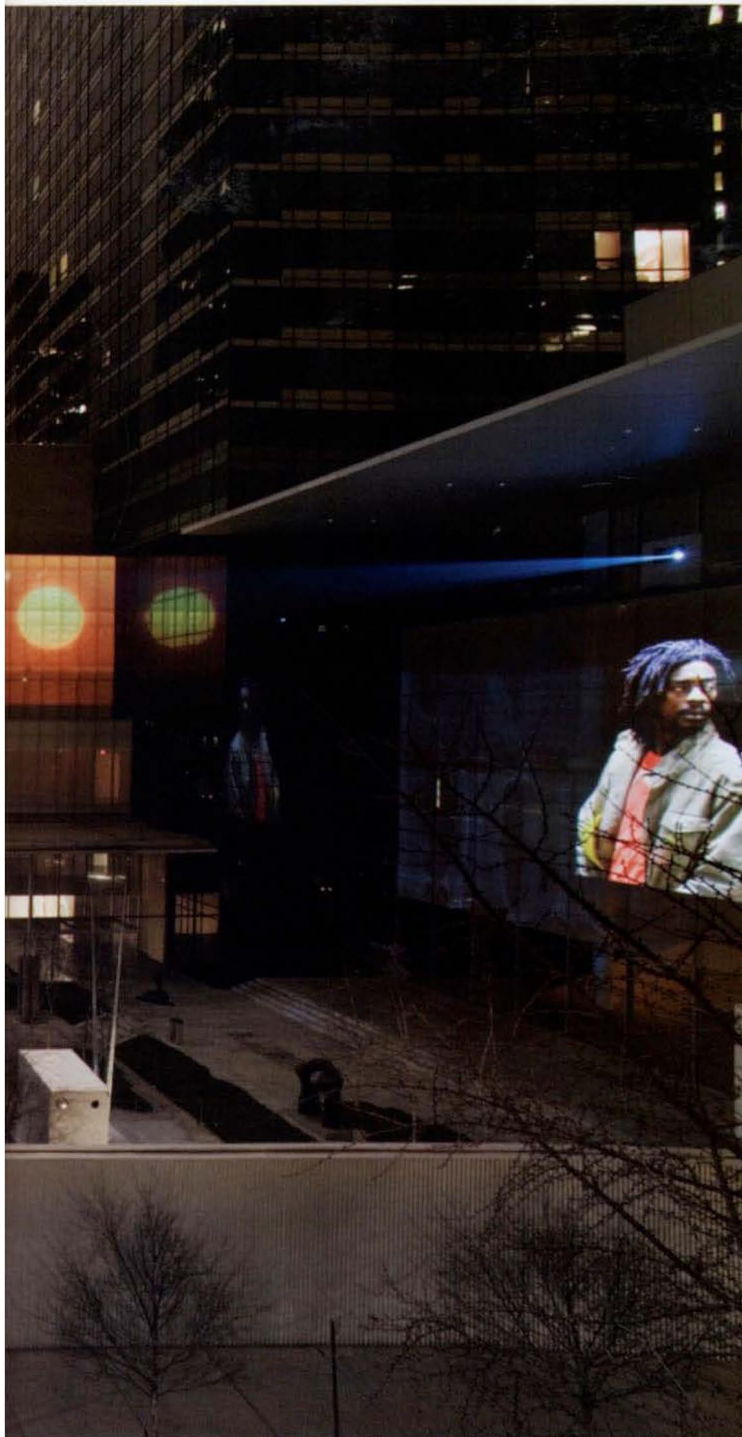


# Art in America



Time and MOMA.

## A Night in the Life

*For his new video installation sleepwalkers, Doug Aitken used the exterior of MOMA as an outdoor theater.*

**BY STEPHANIE CASH**

New Yorkers' private lives are often on display, even, as numerous open window shades reveal, while at home. *Sleepwalkers*, the first major public artwork in the U.S. by Los Angeles-based Doug Aitken, gave viewers—or at least those willing to brave frigid winter nights—a glimpse into the homes and lives of five fictional city dwellers who keep nocturnal schedules. A joint project of Creative Time and the Museum of Modern Art, and organized by Peter Eleey and Klaus Biesenbach, the piece consisted of eight large-scale videos projected onto the exterior walls of MOMA: five inside the sculpture garden on 54th Street, two on the western end (including the side of the adjacent American Folk Art Museum) and one on 53rd Street. The videos are each 13 minutes long and were continuously recombined on the various facades to produce slight variations. From Jan. 16 through Feb. 12, the work was on view nightly from 5 until 10 P.M. During hours when the museum was still open and the interior illuminated, visitors inside could be seen through the projected images, creating another layer of voyeurism for the work's shivering Peeping Toms.

The piece features actors Donald Sutherland as a businessman and Tilda Swinton as an office worker, musician Seu Jorge as an electrician, singer Chan Marshall (Cat Power) as a postal worker, and actor and musician Ryan Donowho as a bicycle messenger. Though Aitken has used recognizable figures in his works before, here they seemed intended to enhance the work's curb appeal. But the familiar visages of Sutherland and Swinton, in particular, were somewhat distracting, upsetting the illusion that we were watching "real New Yorkers."

*Sleepwalkers* sets up a symmetry between the subjects' dissimilar lives. They are each seen awakening as



Exhibition view, showing, in foreground, *K-N-O-C-K-O-U-T* (sonic table), 2005, wood, steel and mixed mediums; on wall, *don't think twice II*, 2006, white neon on blue wood frame. Photo courtesy 303 Gallery, New York.

the burnt-orange sun is setting, preparing to begin their "day," venturing out into the city, and engaged in the drudgery of their jobs and other activities before the sun rises and the cycle begins again—a little different but a lot the same—like any other day. Instead of presenting a continuous narrative, Aitken focuses on the common threads of existence that connect the workers despite their divergent lifestyles. The actors are filmed at synchronous mundane moments and often performing the same actions—waking, showering, having a cup of coffee, walking down a hallway, staring out a window. Architectural and environmental details, such as spinning wheels, coffee cups and light switches, and close-ups of the actors become formal abstractions that are integrated into the urban fabric. Aitken's fast-cut editing interspersed with longer contemplative shots gives the piece a visual rhythm, particularly effective when multiple projections are viewed together.

Despite the film's being shot in public places within the five boroughs of the city that never sleeps, each actor is mostly seen alone. Dreamlike sequences capture them in moments of utter abandon or in daydream—it's hard to tell which. Standing amid a sea of photocopiers, Swinton seems dazed by a machine's hypnotic flashing light; her ennui is chased away by a fantasy of playing violin with an orchestra. After a similarly deadening shift at a postal-sorting facility, Marshall breaks into a fit of spinning, a motion repeated in Jorge's twirling of a lasso, fashioned from electrical cable pulled from a manhole, like an urban cowboy. Sutherland, previously seen as a reserved, detached captain of industry, is hit by a taxi and inexplicably begins tap dancing on its hood; the frenetic activity is echoed in Donowho's rapid drumming on an overturned bucket, a familiar sight to subway riders (though Donowho is actually a drummer, stunt doubles were used in a few scenes). Since the projections were all silent, nearby residents were spared additional urban cacophony, though it was nearly impossible not to "hear," for example, the squeal of the subway brakes. In case viewers felt sound-deprived, they were able to call a special number on their cell phones to listen to recordings of the curators and artist discussing various aspects of the work (also available at [moma.org](http://moma.org)).

Blocks away, in the suitably bustling Times Square, a related work by Aitken, *New Day*, could be seen for one minute every hour as part of Creative Time's ongoing "59th Minute" series. Played on the Astrovision screen, the back side of which was a film location for Jorge's character in *sleepwalkers*, the piece is a single-screen version of the protagonists' activities compressed into a fast-paced spectacle that rivaled the activity below, and at moments could have passed for a movie ad.

Overlapping with the Creative Time/MOMA project by about a week was Aitken's show at 303 Gallery in Chelsea. Best known for his elaborate video installations, Aitken here branched out with photographs, collages, sculptures and a lightbox work. Many of the pieces incorporate light, sound or movement, including *Wilderness* (2006), a wall-mounted panel of slowly moving, reflective steel hexagons, or the neon text of *99¢ Dreams* (2007). *Disappear* (2006) consists of the word spelled out in lower-case-letter-shaped lightboxes that each contain a photographic image of an airplane graveyard on the desert horizon. Perhaps the show's only discernible link to the Creative Time/MOMA project was *don't think twice II* (2006), a dark panel with alternating patterns of two intersecting neon rings of concentric circles that could be seen behind the drumming Donowho in *sleepwalkers*. Aside from *K-N-O-C-K-O-U-T* (sonic table), 2005, a carved wood table on which visitors could use mallets to plunk out sounds, these works seem to have only elusive and momentary appeal. Ultimately, there's not a lot to hang on to.

Aitken's most memorable work continues to be in a less tangible (and less marketable) medium. Like his walk-through film installations *electric earth* (1999) at the Venice Biennale and *new ocean* (2001) at the Serpentine Gallery in London, *sleepwalkers* engages the viewer in a bodily way that his sculptural works, as seen at 303, are as yet unable to match. □

*Doug Aitken's sleepwalkers, organized by Creative Time and the Museum of Modern Art, was on view at MOMA [Jan. 16-Feb. 12]. New Day appeared in Times Square [Jan. 16-Feb. 21]. Aitken's photos and sculptural works could be seen at 303 Gallery [Feb. 3-Mar. 3].*