

303 GALLERY

Capps, Kriston. "Screen Song". Artforum (3/26/12)

ARTFORUM

Screen Song

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A view of Doug Aitken's *SONG 1*. (All photos: Liz Gorman)

DOUG AITKEN'S *SONG 1* took one bunch by surprise: joggers. As Washington's fit ran their twilight routes on the National Mall on Thursday evening, they inevitably slowed to take in the spectacle, necks craned toward the facades of the Hirshhorn. There, at the Smithsonian museum, or more specifically, *on* the museum, Aitken had begun projecting his new video, using eleven mecha-like projectors to transform the entire exterior surface of the ring-shaped building into a film screen.

In-the-know onlookers lined up early in the afternoon, lugging lawn chairs from the museum's patio to the perimeter of its bushy courtyard. Across Jefferson Drive to the museum's north, families, students, and hundreds of other viewers hugged the walls that enclose the excavated sculpture garden and afford the best view. A hush fell over the mounting crowd at 7:45 PM, when, in the gloaming, the feature started. "Amazeballs," whispered one young tween.

The artist himself was holed up inside the museum for his premiere. In the building's basement auditorium, Aitken and Hirshhorn deputy director Kerry Brougher held a discussion before a crowd of three hundred, most of them invited guests and Hirshhorn boosters. (At least a hundred more were turned away at the door.) Aitken spoke with Brougher at length about the live performance of his *Black Mirror*, staged on a barge off Hydra and starring Chloë Sevigny. *SONG 1* has its stars, too, among them actress Tilda Swinton and a panoply of musicians, from Beck to No Age, performing Harry Warren and Al Dubin's old standard "I Only Have Eyes for You." All told, Aitken commissioned about forty different recordings of the song, most of which actually made their way into the looping video.

Of the work at hand, Aitken spoke only briefly, and often let metaphor carry his meaning. "Liquid architecture" was his go-to phrase. "Can you make architecture that has a certain tempo?" Aitken asked. (Yes, he told me later: *SONG 1* is sixty beats per minute.) Others were more direct about *SONG 1*'s purpose. "This is the world's greatest drive-in," said one local.

"My first journey to the Hirshhorn was courtesy of Richard [Koshalek]," Aitken said. The artist explained that the museum's director had brought him in to discuss a renovation of the bookstore. Plans changed somewhat. "What is a book?" Aitken asked the crowd. "A book is knowledge; knowledge is illumination; illumination is light."

After the lecture, guests ventured out to see *SONG 1*. It was night proper by then, and many Washingtonian families had already departed; clusters of people could still be found on blankets all along the courtyard lawn, while early arrivals maintained their vigils in their perimeter chairs, apparently determined to watch the spectacle until its midnight close.

Later, guests made their way back inside for a reception on the museum's third floor, held under the light of Lucio Fontana's neon curlicue sculpture. Friends of the Hirshhorn, many of them new, from the West Coast and New York, drank wine and nibbled on Chinese food. To these out-of-towners, Washington's National Mall revealed its greatest limitation: There are few suitable sites for an afterparty. The lobby eventually cleared, with clutches of VIPs scattering for late-night destinations elsewhere.

As guests searched for taxis, an hour or so still remained for Aitken's mesmerizing video to do its work. And so it did—The Flamingos' aching *shoo-wap-shoo-wap-shoo-wap* echoing around federal Washington. Couples on blankets stayed to the last, making out obliviously as midnight gathered.

— Kriston Capps