

Art Review  
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DOUG  
AITKEN

THE FLANEUR

Sharing City Secrets at MoMA

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portrait WYATT TROLL



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 LA'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](http://www.moma.org)), 16 January – 12 February



this and facing pages: Stills from *sleepwalkers*.  
All courtesy Doug Aitken Studio



