

Reality Show

In a world that seems more a stage than ever, 'reality' television and YouTube have exploded the fourth wall between performer and viewer. So how are artists addressing the new cinema of the street?

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FROM THE BEGINNING, people have confused the projected image with objective reality. When the Lumière Brothers screened their film *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* in 1895, audiences recoiled, thinking the train was headed straight for them. The Lumières also thought their 'actuality films' would have little appeal beyond the initial novelty, because anyone could just as easily walk out on the street and see the same thing. Over a century later, four recent projects by video artists Dara Friedman, Doug Aitken, Tony Conrad and Karin Schneider suggest a transference of filmic space from the cinema to the streets, both literally and metaphorically, as well as realignments of the ideas of audience, actor and the film screen itself.

Receiving a commission from New York's Public Art Fund, Miami-based Friedman conceived a project called *Musical* (2007), in which people spontaneously burst into song – show tunes, no less – in various locations in Midtown Manhattan. She put it into practice every weekday for three weeks last autumn, secretly videotaping the results as respondents to her advertisements for volunteer singers performed in spots ranging from the Westway Diner first thing in the morning to Grand Central or Trump Tower in the middle of the afternoon and the Apple Store at 59th Street at night. The times and locations were not made public, so there was no 'audience'. The video results show passersby oblivious to a soldier crooning as he strolls up Fifth Avenue (he looks somewhat disappointed by the lack of response) or a young woman singing Billy Strayhorn's *Lush Life* (1938) in the middle of Grand Central, although reportedly a woman not connected with the project began singing during one participant's song in Central Park.

Certainly New Yorkers are used to seeing others singing along with their iPods, or simply talking into headset phones, not to mention street performers (or, for the matter, the great number of citizens who talk to themselves). The performers' fellow pedestrians were not supposed to be their audience but rather the 'supporting cast', an idea explored by sociologist Erving Goffman in his theories about contemporary Americans acting out roles in public and private

at all times. But the results of Friedman's experiment also attest to the primacy of sound in contemporary culture, and especially in urban environments – a person suddenly busting out a show tune in the middle of the day becomes just another noise in the hustle and bustle. But would the same seemingly impassive pedestrian watch a homemade video on YouTube of someone singing *Lush Life*? TV ratings show that people are interested in watching amateur renditions of songs on *American Idol*; are they now uninterested in watching an unmediated version of the same?

Last January, the outdoor projection of Doug Aitken's video *Sleepwalkers* (2007) had considerably more success in getting nocturnal urbanites to stop and stare at the seven screens positioned on the facades of the Museum of Modern Art. *Sleepwalkers* follows the daily rituals of five characters – a postal worker, an office worker, a bike messenger, a businessman and an electrician – as they get out of bed and embark on their commutes. They're shown two at a time, on neighbouring screens, and each story has the same duration and structure. Superficially the gigantic presentation is comparable (though dwarfed by) the ongoing advertising video spectacles in Times Square,

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only a few blocks away, and in some respects the project may be a comment on art in competition with the blockbuster stimuli of the advertising and entertainment worlds. But what's compelling about *Sleepwalkers* is that a viewer might notice someone riding a bike down 53rd Street at the very same time the bike messenger is shown pedalling onscreen; if they had been watching the video in a theatre, they wouldn't make that connection. So the viewer is not subsumed into the video's world – the video is subsumed into the outside world.

Both *Musical* and *Sleepwalkers* recall Jean Baudrillard's observation that cinema 'is all over the city, that marvellous, continuous performance of films and scenarios'. Aitken himself has noted that 'the act of watching a film has an affinity with walking through a city. I see a moving image like a street, and you're going down that street making constant decisions about what to see.' Situationist Guy Debord's concept of psychogeography hinted at something similar, in which the streetwalker traversed the urban terrain charged with some awareness of its psychological resonances, but Aitken, unlike Debord, includes the inhabitants in the cityscape. 'In *Sleepwalkers*', he wrote in the shooting script, 'the city becomes a living, breathing body merging with the diverse and constantly changing individuals who make up the city. The individuals in *Sleepwalkers*, in turn, move beyond their physical selves and are transformed by their surroundings.' If Debord looks to the assertion of the individual against the environment, Aitken recognises the flux between the two.

Debord also made films, the most outrageous being *Howlings in Favor of de Sade* (1952). Consisting of alternating imageless white screens accompanied by a soundtrack of non-sequitous dialogue and soundless all-black screens, it provoked riots at its early showings. While not conceived by Debord in these terms, it might be postulated that if, as per Aitken, ambulatory human beings create their own movies out of the landscape before them, then perhaps movies themselves must become a void – or shed their skin. In 1966 Tony Conrad made the film *The Flicker*, which alternated only black and white frames to cause a stroboscopic flicker effect. In the autumn and winter of 2006–7, Conrad exhibited his *Yellow Movies* series (1972–5) at Galerie Daniel Buchholz in Köln and Greene Natfali Gallery in New York, for only the second time since they were made and for the first time in an art gallery. Created to protest the single screenings of films at 1972's Documenta 5 (as opposed to videoworks, which were screened continuously), Conrad fashioned large pieces of paper to resemble cinema screens by painting a white square with a black frame around it, then doused them with cheap housepaint, which would yellow, and change, slowly over time. As a conflation of screen and film frame (the housepaint functioned as emulsion), *Yellow Movies* is problematic as far as the technical definition of motion pictures goes, but the idea of an image that takes years (instead of split seconds) to move is undeniably fascinating (and trumps Douglas Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho*, 1993, an ultra-slow-motion projection of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, 1960, which takes 24 hours to unspool). The idea to use the housepaint came from noticing a discoloration on a recently painted ceiling, and Conrad has written that 'architecture in general can be construed as a kind of filmic space, in which the paint on the walls becomes an emulsion that carries the human story along a trajectory on the timescale of architecture'. So, not only does moving through a city constitute a filmic experience, but the architecture itself can be seen as a movie within a movie.

Karin Schneider's show *Image Coming Soon*, which opened at the Orchard gallery in New York last October, finds a new accommodation for films in an installation situation; the press release promised that films included 'will not be looped. It is likely that only light will be projected

for long stretches of time, instead of the films'. As with *Musical*'s secret schedule, music performances, readings and screenings at the gallery in conjunction with the exhibition 'will not be announced by Orchard'. Like Conrad, Schneider has a notion of displacing the cinema screen; her painting *Moviola* (2007) outlines the image of a film editing table. Meanwhile, stationed across from it, a projector runs without a film, its white light fitting *Moviola*'s screen frame (Amy Granat's film *3 minutes of paint on 6 minutes of film*, 2007, is also sporadically projected onto the painting). With the oil painting *Landscape* (2007), a Hiroshi Sugimoto-like ocean horizon (Sugimoto is also fond of photographing empty movie houses) that seems more like a film projection than a painting, the interchange between canvas and film screen is complete. Schneider's permutation of art and film media is effective, although its significance isn't quite articulated within the paintings themselves. Schneider bisected the already narrow gallery space with a wall of wood studs and Plexiglas, suggesting either a projection room or a camera lens. This offered the viewer the choice of seeing *Image to Come* as projectionist, filmgoer, gallery visitor or documentarian – all possibilities similarly latent in this year's other examples of perambulatory cinema, and theoretically in everyday life itself. ■

WORKS
(IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Dara Friedman

Musical, 2007

A series of performances
on the streets of Midtown Manhattan
17 September – 5 October 2007

Photo: Amy C. Elliott

Courtesy Public Art Fund, New York

Doug Aitken

Sleepwalkers, 2007 (installation view)

Courtesy Creative Time, New York

Sleepwalkers, 2007, film still

Courtesy Doug Aitken Studio, Venice, and Creative Time, New York

Tony Conrad

Yellow Movies, 1972–5 (installation view, Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Köln, 2006)

Courtesy Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Köln