

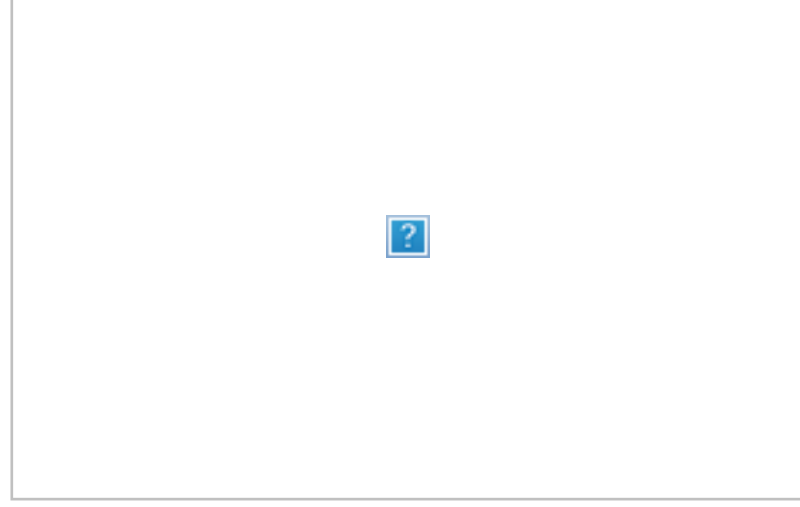
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BY JENNIFER HIGGIE  
29 OCT 2009

## Doug Aitken in Rome

I went to Rome for a flying visit last week, for the opening of Doug Aitken's new film installation and performance *Frontier* (curated by Francesco Bonami, it's the third commission for Enel Contemporanea). I hadn't been to the city in years, though, when I was about 20, I lived there for a while and loved it. Even so, I had forgotten precisely how weary and magnificent it is – the very air seems varnished. I went for a walk and kept getting lost; I thought I knew my way around, but was constantly disoriented. Birds (swifts? swallows? bats?) were flinging themselves across the twilight blue of the sky in the kind of intricate choreographed formations Busby Berkley might have liked; infinite Baroque churches were lit up by the fading gold-tipped rays of the sun, every side street promised a journey towards a piazza of absurd, melancholic beauty and the sound of the gridlocked traffic was deafening (why do people toot their horns when no-one can move?). How can a city look this good, be this fascinating, and still, despite its chaos, function with such boundless charm? Hackney it ain't. (But at least we don't have that dangerous clown Silvio Berlusconi running the show; Italians seem to both deplore and reward his ludicrous shenanigans in equal measure.)



Doug's piece was the perfect complement to my struggling memory. Staged on the tip of an island in the middle of the Tiber after the sun went down, the immersive experience that is *Frontier* takes place in a roofless, minimalist structure, interrupted by small, glowing windows, within which a frieze of filmed scenes shot in Rome, Los Angeles, Israel and South Africa (although you'd be hard-pressed to know which was which) drift across multiple screens. The film follows (if that's the word for such a meandering, enigmatic journey) a Hollywood-handsome Ed Ruscha wandering through urban wastelands and modern-day ruins, sitting in a cinema, looking up at buildings, gazing out on a prairie or being absorbed in the shadows formed by a tree. He appears both wholly absorbed in his own thoughts, and aware of everything going on around him which he observes with the inscrutable gaze of a modern day, west coast Buddha; it's hard to imagine he was directed. Various characters wander in and out of shot: a couple sleeping, a man reading a book, people strolling across a soulless square; at one point a cowboy emerges from an inky, misty gloom to crack his whip and the image dissolves suddenly to focus on a house of cards tumbling into darkness which, in turn, dissolves into an ominous scene of young men running wildly, as if scattering after a crime, through mist. Despite these occasional intimations of violence or unrest, the overall mood is one of intense, often languid, concentration; no one talks – how could they, absorbed as they are in such an environment?



Gorgeous swathes of intense colour wash across the screen: deep red material appears to billow; the mid-west sky is stained a perfect, faded denim-blue; the inky patterns of book type explode in close-up after an image of a man reading. The soundtrack adds to the sense of vague, disjunctive hallucination; it's an impressionistic sound collage, comprising repeated snatches of the piano, drums and horns from a Billie Holiday track; water dripping and wind blowing; machines; the whirring of film running through a projector; footsteps and tap-dancing; the strains of music from the Middle East; and ominous repeated chords and tones that increase and decrease in urgency. When I saw it, the film was accompanied by live performances that included young men whip-cracking, tap dancing and playing instruments, and a woman, as imperious as a statue, standing in the middle of the 'Coliseum' calling what sounded like a sort of operatic cattle auction. To say any of this seemed incongruous in Rome is beside the point; this is a city familiar with the vagaries of invasion. The film ends where it began; with Ruscha sitting in a cinema, observing images flickering on a screen.



If *Frontier* is about one thing – although reducing this complex work to a simple idea is a little like trying to hum Wagner – I'd say it's about the panoramic vagaries of memory and the minutiae of the details that created the way we think of the past; after all, for a memory to be made, and before the inevitable distortions that time heaps upon it, it first has to be lived and living is a visceral, as well as a mental activity (we sometimes have to be reminded of this). An undercurrent of *Frontier* tugs at some deceptive simple questions: at what point do fiction and documentary merge? At what moment do we begin to create fictions of our own lives? When do frontiers become absorbed into the very areas they're demarcating?



We live through time and all we're left with is impressions and objects. Neither are flimsy or – weirdly despite the absence of the moments, the people, the emotions that created them in the first place – ever fleeting. Doug once said in [an interview he did with Ed Ruscha](#) that we ran in *frieze* that 'not being concerned with time is the most difficult thing that were confronted with.' I second that emotion.

JENNIFER HIGGIE

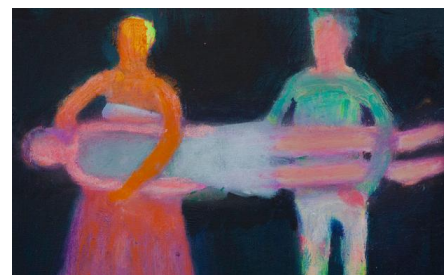
Jennifer Higgie is editor-at-large of *frieze*, based in London, UK. She is the host of *frieze's* first podcast, *Bow Down: Women in Art History*. Her book *The Mirror and the Palette* is forthcoming from Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

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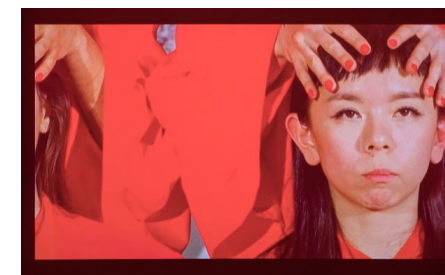
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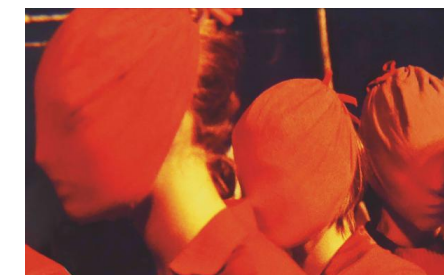
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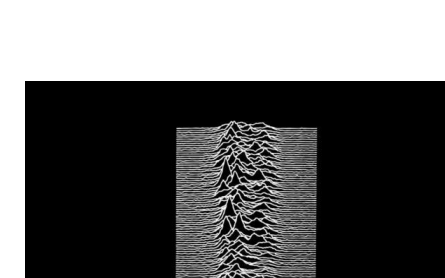
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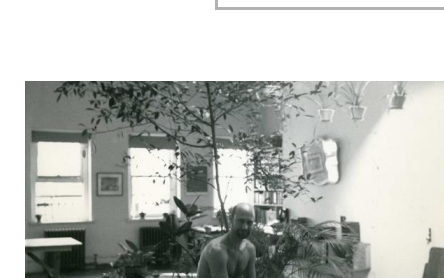
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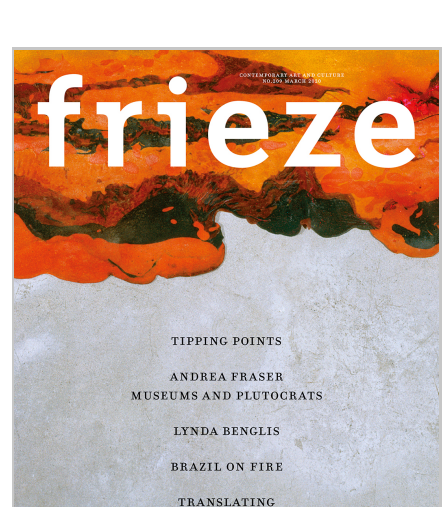


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