

ARTFORUM

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Sam Green



Utopia in Four Movements is the latest critically acclaimed project by San Francisco-based filmmaker Sam Green and sound artist Dave Cerf. This “live documentary,” which explores the utopian impulse for community through the collective experience of cinema, will play at the Kitchen in New York on October 7, 8, and 9 with special musical guests the Quavers and Brendan Canty; additional screening dates can be found [here](#).

AFTER I FINISHED THE WEATHER UNDERGROUND, I started to think about making a new film about the utopian impulse and the fact that we seem to be living in an anti-utopian time. I knew that I didn’t want to have interviews with academics or create some historical survey about utopian desires. I wanted something that was more emotional—a meditation using history to try to make some sense of the present. The four different stories I selected for this piece try to tackle that inquiry, some more explicitly than others.

I shot these four different stories over several years, edited them all together, and then showed the rough cut to people but it didn’t actually seem to make sense. No one understood the connections. I realized I needed to provide some sort of explanation and decided to try a voice-over. But I don’t really like voice-over films, so I was very hesitant to do it. When I was invited to do a presentation, I contacted Dave Cerf (who made the sound track for *The Weather Underground*) and asked if he would play music while I talked about the project and cued clips from the segments using PowerPoint. There was something really lovely about it. I became interested in the distinctions between a voice-over movie and a movie where someone is talking in person. There are a lot of differences, namely the live element. But what does that mean? What is it about that liveness that charms me? Then we did another presentation, and then one more, and at a certain point I realized: This form actually works!

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Usually, I make a film because I'm smitten with one particular thing. All four segments of this work come from that impulse. The Esperanto episode is the most overtly about utopia. I knew vague things about Esperanto, as most people do. I thought it was invented in the 1950s or something like that. Then I came across more details about its history; it was actually created in the late 1800s, which surprised me. Its real heyday was in the '20s and '30s, and so it coincided with this blossoming modernist interest in utopia. People believed that by being scientific and rational we could make a radically better world. It caught my attention because, in a way, the arc of Esperanto sort of parallels the rise and fall of that modernist utopian impulse. Hopefully, the themes and histories of each of the four sections resonate with one another and create a larger set of questions and ideas. It's nice to do something that falls between film and performance because you can pick and choose the elements you like from either tradition. One thing I've always hated in film is that at the end there's the credits; in a way, it ruins the moment. You've got to sit there as five minutes of credits scroll by. So it has been great to have the credits printed in a program that you can look at later. There's also an essay in the program by Rebecca Solnit, which gives some context to the piece. She touches very eloquently on the connection between utopia and having this live cinematic experience.

Figuring out where to show the work has been an interesting process. We've performed at film festivals, but we're also doing screenings at art centers like the Wexner and the Walker. In the art and performance worlds, it's been easy to work with people. But at film festivals it has been more of a challenge. Every venue we've worked with has been totally different, and so each show varies depending on things like the distance between the stage and the audience. It's a complicated work--the music, words, and images have to line up.

I didn't really have a road map for the performance, so we've been figuring it out as we go. I think over time we're making it looser, but it has required a certain amount of tightness. Still, each time we try new things. When we premiered it at Sundance somebody asked a question right in the middle of the piece, which was funny and also thrilling. I like the possibility of these sorts of interventions, and we're slowly inviting more of that.

— As told to Lauren O'Neill-Butler