



ARTS ILLUSTRATED



Q&A

All for One + One for All



AES+F, *Défilé #1*
Digital collage,
LightJet print on Duratrans,
Diasac, Lightbox
2000-2007

The artist collective AES+F, currently showing at the Kochi Muziris Biennale, talk to us about the shifting roles of creator and viewer, of why they hope for the widest possible audience, and how, mostly, the audience they create for is themselves

PRAVEENA SHIVRAM

Luis Buñuel's 1929 film, *Un Chien Andalou*, begins with a man sharpening a blade. He then walks out to the balcony, mechanically puffs at his cigarette as if keeping time, and there is a shot of a woman in between, sitting on a chair, almost listlessly, looking straight at you. The man in the balcony watches slivers of cloud making its way across the sky as it cuts through the moon, which is intercut with the woman's eyelids that are opened wide as a knife slashes through her eyeball.

It was a deliciously shocking introduction to the world of surrealism for me. It shook me up, as it was meant to, and later, in the quiet recesses of thoughts that would eventually bleed into my dreams, it thrilled me, as it was meant to. Here was a movement that allowed you to traverse through the muddled terrain of darkness, that quicksand of vile excesses, with an almost studied indifference that bordered on the casual, even when you were in the midst of a heightened emotional response, making you see that it is only in the darkest corner that deepest hope could be found. It was something I knew even back then, that it was a precious recognition of the

human mind's limitless capabilities and the infinite patterns a set of ever-changing, yet finite, dots can make. It was something that was unhindered, like a caged horse, not yet broken in, suddenly set free.

The next time this happened – well, not quite in the same way, of course – I was looking at the Russian collective, AES+F's works. It was a similar 'surreal' rush of encountering the unknown that instead of resisting you end up whole-heartedly embracing. In the video project *Inverso Mundus* (2015), for instance, based on medieval engravings that paint a rabidly dystopian picture (a pig cuts a butcher, a man carries a donkey, etc.), AES+F have taken that and placed it in a contemporary setting – immediately, the unfamiliar, the ridiculous, the unfathomable, becomes the familiar, the recognisable, and scarily, the habitual (some characters take selfies with the Apocalypse). It is done with such banality that beneath the visual extravaganza you witness, you begin to sense something uncomfortable snaking its way into your thoughts. You begin to sense the essence of that muddled terrain, because you find that it is your feet that fill

those shoes. Because here, the collaboration isn't just between the creator and the viewer but in the process itself, and it is in this dance of constantly shifting perspectives that AES+F situates its muse. 'That's exactly how it is. We are the creator and the viewer simultaneously,' they tell us over an e-mail interview, quick to clarify that they will answer the questions as 'one', and not individually. So, perhaps, it would be surreal to now mention that the collective is made up of conceptual architects Tatiana Arzamasova and Lev Evzovich, multidisciplinary designer Evgeny Svyatsky and photographer Vladimir Fridkes.

In 2014, for an interview for *Inhale* magazine, they were asked why it was AES+F and not AESF, when Fridkes joined the collective in 1995. "'AES+F'" – looks better and is easier to pronounce,' is what they said, and that extreme honesty, like it is an obvious quality in human beings, is what defines their work. It's almost as if the sharp edges that kind of candour brings, cuts through your eyes and, therefore, what you get is always more than what you see.



● AES+F, *The Feast of Trimalchio*, Still #2-1-28, 1-channel HD video still, pigment inkjet print on FineArt Baryta paper, 2010

● AES+F, *Angels-Demons*, Installation view from Festival Lille 3000, photo AES+F, 2009

● AES+F, *Europe, Europe #5*, From the series 'Europe, Europe', porcelain, photo of revers view, 2008

Excerpts from the interview

It is hard to define the 'audience' today; access is like an untamed wild beast, and reach/impact a wilder forest, and put into the mix a volatile political climate and you have an equally exciting and debilitating arena for contemporary art. As a collective that looks at an image as a 'discourse generator' in a 'game of aesthetics', who do you 'see' first when you think of an 'audience'? And, more importantly, does what you see change with every work you produce?

AES+F: After the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, there were no institutions or galleries; nobody was even interested in contemporary art. To reach a wide audience, in the *Islamic Project*, we first produced posters and postcards that were disseminated through mass media, like newspapers and magazines. From very early on, our method was to reach the general public. We never try to target a specific group. We always hope for the widest possible audience, and that everyone would respond in some way. The result, however, is that we usually get to see very few interesting individual thoughts and opinions. We generally think of our own emotional triggers when we create the work, so in a way, the audience we create for is ourselves.

When working with the different energies of a collective, do you think that somehow adds more credence to what you create because it isn't easy for the audience to categorise it into a single source, but rather, the very fact of a collective co-creation makes my reading of the work more inclusive?

AES+F: It was never interesting for us to create work that possesses an obvious political, social, or



gender identity. Contemporary reality is always more complex. We tend to think of ourselves as possessing a multi-identity, or what we consider to be a contemporary identity. Maybe that's because there are four of us. Our visual statements are always multi-faceted. Metaphorically, while one person has bifocal eyesight and can only look at something from one angle, we have something that resembles 3D scanning, viewing the subject from many sides simultaneously.

There is a very strong subversive element in your works that while leaving it open to multiple interpretations, also makes it visually engaging. How conscious are you of both these elements – of what you want to convey and how you convey it. I ask this specifically in the context of how you mix up artistic mediums as well – image/video/installation/performance/drawing/collage – that while seamless is also somehow glaringly not seamless, almost as if you want to pull my attention to the irregularities as much as the regularities.

AES+F: The disconnect between meaning and form, the inner and the outer, has always been intentional in our work. This is a property of contemporary society – the surface is always somehow

removed from the content. Reality is like a beautiful still life, but some of the fruit is quite rotten, and some made of plastic. Like in the *Feast of Trimalchio*, all the food served to the guests isn't real – they are plastic emulations, and all the drinks are made of cleaning products. Sometimes this does look seamless, but sometimes the viewer notices that something isn't right.

All art is, at some level or the other, a manipulation of the viewer's emotional response. What remains unknown is from where the viewer chooses to situate himself/herself within that emotional response. But when using multiple mediums like music, performance, camera angles, colours, costume, setting, animation, do you think it ironically restricts the boundary from where you create (and manipulate) art?



• AES, Red Square, from the series 'AES – Witnesses of the Future. Islamic Project', digital collage, pigment inkjet print on paper, 1996



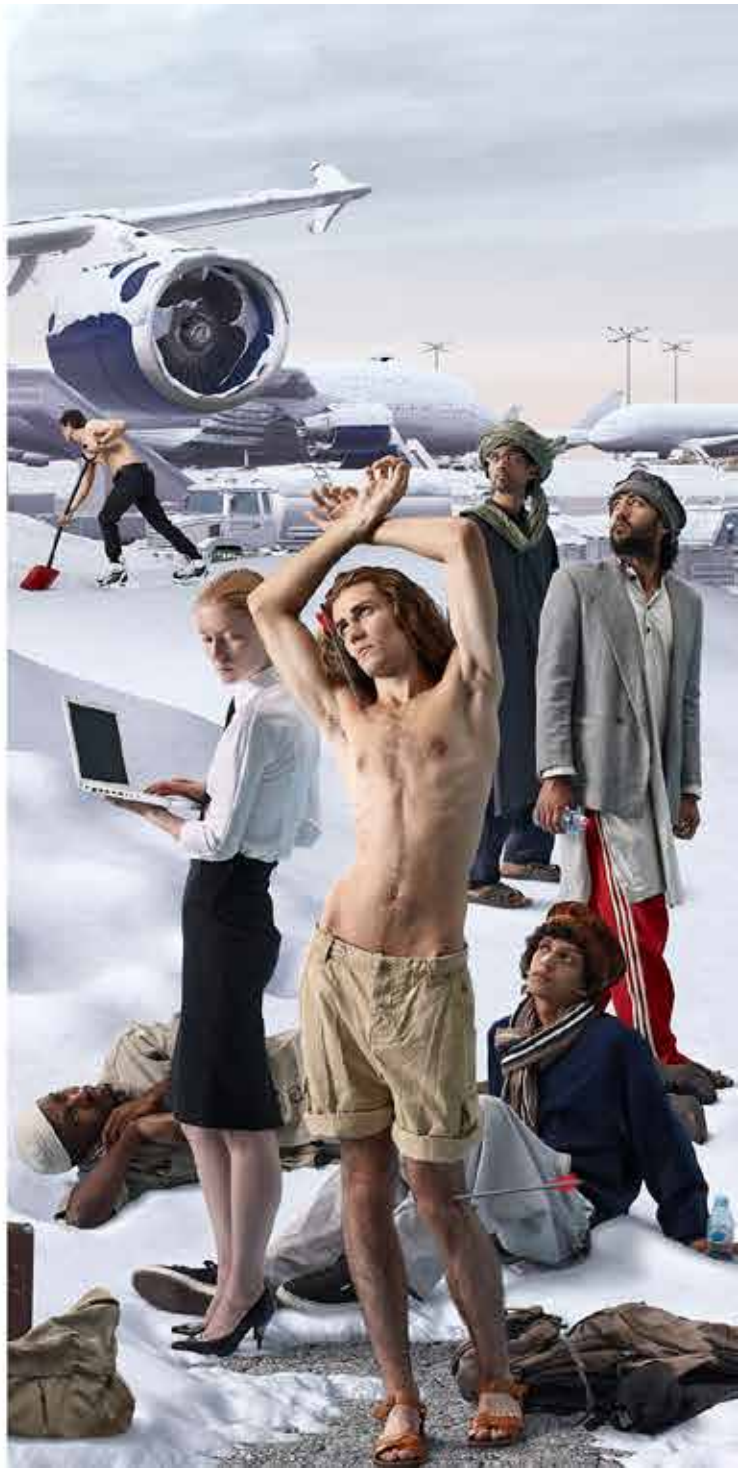
• AES, Rome, St Peter Cathedral, from the series 'AES – Witnesses of the Future. Islamic Project' Digital collage, pigment inkjet print on paper, 1996



• AES+F, Action Half Life, Episode 1, #6, Digital collage, pigment inkjet print on canvas, 2004



• AES+F, KFNy (King of the Forest: New York), From the cycle of projects 'King of the Forest', photograph, pigment inkjet print on canvas, 2003



AES+F, Allegoria
Sacra, Snow Elegy,
Digital collage, 2014



AES+F, Last Riot 2, Tondo #16, Digital collage, pigment inkjet print on canvas, 2007

All images courtesy of AES+F

AES+F: We think that we don't restrict the viewer to anything. Everyone is in the prison of their socio cultural contexts. The emotional reactions vary widely depending on the viewer's own worldview, and sometimes these reactions are very interesting and unexpected for us. You could say that, as viewers, we also exist within the boundaries of our own context. We can't think of all possible reactions, and oftentimes find other people's reactions to our work much more interesting than our own.

What do you, as a collective, find more gratifying – the response from a 'live' audience, that which you can see and interact with, or the response from a retrospective audience, that which you cannot see or interact with?

AES+F: These are always very different, and we like them both. With a live audience, you could always see the expression and the emotion. In a retrospective audience, it is always interesting to read some thought-through opinion that nobody would ever say to us personally, even if it were highly negative or positive.

You have mentioned before that 'mass ideologies, mass mythologies' are subjects that interest you. I am curious to know which aspect of it excites you more as creators – the fact that it easily lends itself to 'social surrealism' or that it allows you to go beyond 'political activism'? Or, perhaps, both?

AES+F: It's definitely both. Mass ideologies and mass mythologies are not the big ideologies of the 20th century, like Communism or Capitalism. The contemporary situation is really much more like antique polytheism with a huge variety of myths, gods, heroes, comedies, tragedies, real and virtual.

This Pantheism is what can be called social surrealism, or hybrid reality, or post-truth, or any of the other trendy terms. We like observing this mutating reality, which is far from political activism, because political activism always supports some ideology or another.

How do you make sense of this information and stimuli overload we deal with every day? Both as artists creating and as artists observing? More importantly, does it ever worry you that the audience's mind, already overwhelmed, may not respond to your work the way you wanted them to? I understand that this is something that cannot be predicted, of course, but in a general sense, does a weakening of the creative impulse among the social media generation worry you as artists?

AES+F: This is a question that we find very interesting. It is irritating and stimulating at the same time. How does one stay in the mainstream and at the same time be outside of it? We are always reformulating what art is – it must exist within the stream, but at the same time reflect on it from the outside. The faster the flow of information, the more people need the 'slow-motion' that art can give them.

And, finally, what do you think is at the heart of AES+F? Is it like the river swiftly diverging into the many different works that you create, or like the mountain, rooted in one spot, gently changing with time?

AES+F: Metaphors with nature aren't really applicable to us. We are neither a river nor a mountain, but probably something a lot more artificial. Maybe we are like a city that constantly changes and evolves.

