

Eve Sussman Goes Post-Postmodern



Eve Sussman, founder of the art collective Rufus Corporation, burst onto the scene when she premiered her 12-minute film “89 Seconds at Alcázar,” a reimagined look at the creation of Diego Velázquez’ 1656 painting “Las Meninas (The Maids of Honor),” at the 2004 Whitney Biennial. Two years later, she unveiled her dialog-free film adaptation of “The Rape of the Sabine Women.” This month, Sussman has gone post-postmodern with “whiteonwhite:algorithmicnoir,” which was inspired by Russian avant-garde painter Kazimir Malevich. The ambitious film consists of 3,000 clips, 80 voice-overs, and 150 pieces of music, which constantly rearrange themselves with the help of a custom-made computer algorithm. BULLETT met up with Sussman in her Brooklyn atelier, and what started out as a discussion on “whiteonwhite:algorithmicnoir” became something else entirely.

BULLETT: Tell us about the inception of this project.

EVE SUSSMAN: It started because one of the actors-writers with whom I collaborate, Jeff Wood [who plays Mr. Holz in the film] and I were talking over ideas about space. I mentioned—almost as a joke—the idea of making a film based on “White on White” by [Russian painter Kazimir] Malevich. It would show a white square on a white square—basically, it would be filming nothing, right? Wood was very interested in the idea of space-tourism and space-travel. We started the shoot by going to Central Asia to visit Baikonur Cosmodrome [a space launch station in Kazakhstan]. Right now, it’s the only place from where you can get to the International Space Station, whether you are an astronaut or cosmonaut. We tried to enter Baikonur, but we couldn’t because it’s a military base. Still, we attempted to visit, got arrested, and got detained. We were held in the police station for five hours. Finally, they let us go but then we were in the middle of Kazakhstan.

Where did you end up shooting most of your footage?

In an oil-boom town on the Caspian Sea called Aktau. It built by the Soviets in the early ‘60s to mine uranium, and it has a very strange aura. At first it was quite intense and seemed really unattractive, like a place you’d never want to spend any time. And then, after a couple of hours, you realize, Oh, this is actually very interesting. There was so much geometric, brutalist architecture, because everything was numbered—there were no street names. It was kind of like being inside a combination lock, and it started to feel like this town could be some retro-future film noir set. We started calling it City-A, as a nod to Alphaville, in which the main character supposedly exists in the future, but is in fact running around ‘60s Paris at night.

The whole thing sounds quite guerilla-style. Did you get permits to shoot?

We didn’t have permission at all. The first time we went with a small crew—we were about 10 people—and we had a local guy from Aktau who acted as our “fixer.” He got us access to the inside of these buildings, where normally we would never have been able to go. But we didn’t have any official permissions; he basically called in favors from friends and knew everyone in the town. He was able to get us into the old Russian factory that you see in the film.

I read somewhere that the workers in the footage actually work there.

They were doing their jobs and we were sort of dancing around them.

How long has this project been going on?

We started shooting in 2008, and our final shoot was in March 2009. From 2009 until now, Kevin Messman and I have been editing it. About a year-and-a-half ago, we hired Jeff Garneau, the programmer who created the algorithm.

Can you tell me more about the Serendipity Machine that rearranges the film at all times?

The Serendipity Machine is really the algorithm. I sort of jokingly call it the Serendipity Machine. At first, I thought we would build a computer that would give us more luck than we could ever have on our own. A lot of what's interesting about editing happens by luck: you put something here and something there, and suddenly that juxtaposition is interesting and often that comes about by chance, it comes about by serendipity. And so, initially the desire was just to create a tool in the studio that would give us more luck than we'd have just as editors on our own. The "machine" would show us many juxtapositions, and would do that much more quickly than I could ever do physically, and manually. Can the machine suggest things I would never think of? Of course it can. I thought of it as an editing tool, a tool that we would not show to the public. I never thought of it as something we would tour or show. And then, the "serendipity machine" sort of took over. It got more and more complex and as we put in more material, voice-overs, video, and music, we realized "Oh, it actually feels like a movie! It has a life of its own and we can tour this thing." For about the last year, we've been taking it around to different theatrical screenings and exhibitions as a work in progress, sort of as a preview. But now, what's showing in New York is really the premiere. We did a premiere at the Toronto Film Festival as part of Future Projections. I really feel like now I'm not going to add more material. For the last year and a half, I've been adding new data. In theory, I could always add new data. At some point though I said "I have to stop."

It sounds like an all-consuming project.

Like a plant or ivy, it'll start crawling all over you and after a while, you won't be able to do anything else.

Writing and directing is very much about control, but this film is decidedly about leaving things up to chance. Did you start with a script?

Initially, there were only three of us: me, the actor, and another cinematographer, Angela Christlieb, who is a great filmmaker in her own right. We developed the script while traveling. During every trip, and in between each trip, we wrote more storylines. A lot of the voice-overs were written after we got back from the last shoot. We began with the basic idea of a geophysicist who arrives in this town, is coerced into a job, can't really leave, maybe he gets his stuff stolen, he gets strange phone calls, and nobody really knows what's going on. Maybe everybody is doped up on Lithium. Time doesn't seem to be functioning the way it should be.

Architecture is really crucial to the film, for which you built City-A out of a bunch of cities and places.

It's important that you point that out, because most people look at the film and say, "Where is this location?" It's actually not a location; it's a city built from at least five different locations.

I think it's something we've all dreamed of, creating a Utopia out of our favorite places around the world. Using that logic, you created a Dystopia.

That's really lovely and scary, what you just said. It's kind of like saying, "What if I had all of my favorite people in the same room?"

Karl Marx summarized modernity by saying that "all that is solid melts into air." Where do you think your film stands in relation to this understanding of modernity?

I don't know if it stands in relation to it. With this film, I was more concerned about commenting on the hubris of mankind. Even in the smallest society, there will always be someone who ends up in a leadership role. Because of human nature's desire to control things, that can quickly get out of hand. We can't actually avoid it because it's prevalent throughout every aspect of history. Will we ever get to a point in our utopian future where people no longer suffer from hubris? I don't think so.

Reality in the film is controlled through Lithium-drugged individuals and regulated clocks. Are there corollaries in the real world?

I think we're all somehow controlled, whether or not we know it. We're controlled by the advertising you see, by the culture in which we grow up, and by the society that surrounds us. We like to think we're free, but are we? And since when?

Which actually leads nicely into my final question: What do you think of Dubai?

It's sort of like the mutant, steroid version of what's happening in a lot of places, but it's completely spun out of control there. It's happening in a lot of new, rich Asian countries. It's happening in many places in America. Luckily, because of the crash, some of it had to slow down. Some of that hubris and blind ambition has been called into question. You can't go to Dubai and not be horrified. It makes you question why people want these things, and how people are so easily pushed into consuming certain types of culture. We're so conditioned to consume certain types of culture, whether we live in Dubai, Las Vegas, or even New York.

"whiteonwhite:algorithmicnoir" can be seen at Cristin Tierney until October 22.

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