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Eve Sussman | Rufus Corporation
Dog Rolls (video still from *89 seconds at Alcázar*)
 2004



Eve Sussman | Rufus Corporation
Widow on the Set (production still from *89 seconds at Alcázar*)
 2004
 photo by Benedikt Partenheimer



Eve Sussman | Rufus Corporation
Girls at the Pool (production still from *The Rape of the Sabine Women*)
 2006
 photo by Benedikt Partenheimer

An interview with Eve Sussman FILMING THE INVISIBLE by Emily Nathan

There are a number of mistakes people make about **Eve Sussman**. She is not British, although she travelled extensively during her childhood, and is now based out of a studio apartment facing the East River in the heart of Hasidic Williamsburg; her art is not exclusively about Art History, although her best-known productions happen to be; and her career did not begin in 2004, when her silent, ten-minute film *89 Seconds to Alcázar* was included in the Whitney Biennial. That work, made with an ad hoc band of jolly collaborators she has dubbed the Rufus Corporation and continues to work with (Sussman rarely credits herself alone, insisting that much of what she does is synergistic) involved a team of actors and a carefully constructed set, and brought Vélazquez's 1656 masterpiece, *Las Meninas*, to life.

In 2006, her video-opera *The Rape of the Sabine Women* debuted at the 47th International Thessaloniki Film Festival in Greece. Billed by Roberta Smith in the *New York Times* as an "avant-garde costume drama in five acts," *The Rape* features a searing score composed by Jonathan Bepler in the place of any dialogue, and situates the ancient myth -- and the Neo-Classical painting by **Jacques-Louis David** -- in the 1960s, head-scarved housewives and all.

But Sussman was making art long before all that, in New York and elsewhere, and her CV reads like an itinerary across the globe. She has also worked in construction, and her earlier works might be best described as "architectural inventions" -- some made with the support of art institutions and many without -- that incorporated city buildings, sculpture, and occasionally photography and film.

This month augurs another break-out production for Sussman and her team. *whiteonwhite:algorithmic noir*, their first film in three years, had its North American premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival last week after a run at London's Haunch of Venison, and opens in



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Disintegration at Hydra (film still from *The Rape of the Sabine Women*)
2006



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Themis in the Birdcage (film still from *The Rape of the Sabine Women*)
2006



"whiteonwhite:algorithmicnoir," installation shot, with "serendipity machine" at left, April 2011, Haunch of Venison London



Eve Sussman | Rufus Corporation

whiteonwhite:algorithmicnoir (film still)
2007-2011

New York at Cristin Tierney Gallery tomorrow, Sept. 15th. Shot over the course of three years during a series of expeditions throughout Central and Western Asia, the film takes place largely in Aktau -- aka "City A" -- a "dystopian futuropolis" of ex-Soviet architecture in the desert of Azerbaijan.

Still, *algorithmicnoir* plays like no ordinary movie, and we'd expect nothing less from Sussman, who has continually challenged conventions of cinematic and narrative form. Edited in real time by a custom programmed computer -- read: algorithm -- that Sussman calls the "serendipity machine," the project's constituent 3,000 clips, 80 voice-overs and 150 pieces of music are reorganized anew at every screening. Each viewing is unique: the story runs forever and never plays the same way twice, but manages to maintain the eerie ether of a film noir, the intrigue of a science fiction and the scope of an epic.

Recently, Sussman met me near her Williamsburg studio to discuss why she lets the audience think for itself, how her work as a contractor relates to her art, and what she hopes to achieve by surrendering control to a computer.

Emily Nathan: Perhaps it would be best to begin with a discussion of this vast project, *whiteonwhite*, of which the "algorithmic noir" movie is just one part.

Eve Sussman: *whiteonwhite* has been an all-encompassing project over the last few years. I consider the entire expedition that we made to Central Asia, Azerbaijan, Dubai, Aktau, among other places, to exist under the rubric of *whiteonwhite*. We made the first trip in 2007, and began filming in 2008. We're still developing material; I'll be adding new material up until the premiere in New York on the 15th.

EN: Is it ever-evolving?

ES: It has been, but I'll probably stop developing material for it after this month. It's an organic movie, though, and that excites me. Things can be timely; they can be cogent. One of our collaborators was recently reading the news about these demonstrations in Aktau -- the city we were primarily shooting in -- and he wrote a fictional voice-over that's based on that recent news. We haven't even recorded it yet, and it's engaged with something that happened last week. The fact that we can create fictional elements based on current events and those can tie into our film is interesting to me.

EN: The dialogue between the present and the past is something recurring in your work. In *whiteonwhite:algorithmicnoir*, the film reconstructs



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 (film still)
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itself at every showing, offering a constantly updated present. What does that achieve?

ES: Well, the film navigates a number of temporal dynamics: there was our experience of being on location, shooting; then we have the period-piece nature of the footage, in which our main character, actor Jeff Wood, wears a wardrobe from the 1970s and operates against this markedly ex-Soviet-era architectural landscape; lastly, there's the play between our footage, which has an archival, dated look to it, and the narrative each viewer constructs in his or her own mind at every viewing. It was important to me to *suggest* narrative, and not to prescribe it.

EN: Speaking of prescription, can you discuss the film's title, *whiteonwhite:algorithmicnoir*? How do algorithm and film noir enter into the way the film works?

ES: The tradition of film noir has its own rigorous vocabulary and structure; an algorithm is a logical function that controls the operation of something according to fixed rules. For *algorithmicnoir*, we have plucked tropes from both sides of those formulas, constructing a work that has some structural and formal qualities in common with film noir and that operates according to fixed rules -- in this case, the algorithm programmed into the serendipity machine, which edits every run of the film. I'm concerned with creating frameworks, and allowing space for the audience to fill in the blanks.

For me, the most interesting challenge is always how to film the invisible, that is the energy and the dynamic between people; this is not something fixed or static. The "serendipity machine" functions on a level that's something like everyday life: everyone has routines that they go through daily, but exactly what happens each time you traverse those patterns is always slightly different. Sometimes it's extremely resonant, and sometimes it is less so. My intention with the *algorithmicnoir* was to put a framework in place that would facilitate a narrative structure, but wouldn't decide *for* the viewers what that resonant thing will be for them.

That will be different for each person -- and that's really how existence functions. We project ourselves onto and into any given situation; it's the basic conflict of our lives. The fact that every viewing takes a fixed number of constituent elements and organizes them anew simulates the way everyone processes the world in his or her own way. I'm intrigued by narratives in which viewers aren't spoon-fed by the director. We embarked on these research expeditions to gather what I could call "poetic data," culled from what was going on around us, and the texts we wrote are a mixture of



Artist Eve Sussman in her Williamsburg, Brooklyn studio

fiction and reality. Of course we were influenced by things that happened to us and people we met.

EN: The course of things changed as you go?

ES: Completely; we set out for the Baikonur Cosmodrome -- the Russian space station -- in the middle of the Kazakh desert, and ended up in a pre-planned, ex-Soviet town. At first we thought it was bleak and a bit horrific, but then there was a moment of realization that in fact it was cinematic and quite striking. The spaces in our footage are beautiful, in a weird way -- there is such a strong geometry to them, and they seem so full of mystery, because they look so different from what we're used to seeing in Western Europe or America.

EN: You have expressed an interest in investigating the idea of "better living through design," and this is manifest in *algorithmic noir* in the ex-Soviet architectural landscape in the background. What do you mean by "better living through design?"

ES: I have indeed been fascinated with the iconic desire to create a more utopian, and maybe more hopeful, future, and with the failure of that "utopian ideal" -- especially with how that manifests in architecture. It's a concept I dealt with in *The Rape of the Sabine Women* as well: questioning that credo that you get better living through design and suggesting that even if you manage to get the perfect house and the perfect hairdo and the trophy bride, it will inevitably fall apart.

The idea that utopia is in reach is hubristic, really -- you can see it especially with those mid-century architects. If you saw the recent Rem Koolhaas show at the New Museum, he put into relief the concept of architecture and the role of the architect around the mid-century. At that time, there was a belief that architects could contribute to humanity by designing master-planned social spaces -- like Brasilia, for example, or Aktau, where we were shooting; they believed that they could *construct* a functioning society.

In some ways, they were right. While shooting *algorithmic noir*, we stayed in 15 ex-Soviet apartments that were built in the late '50s and early '60s, in six different cities, and they are in fact incredibly practical. They are well-designed, they're comfortable -- they have more air and light than your average East Village tenement in New York City. But every trend has an expiration-date built into it, and the assertion that what is being built in any given moment is going to promote better living doesn't acknowledge that fact. During *white on white*, we went to cities and towns that were constructed according to ideas of a utopian architecture, but our narratives suggest the contradictions and potential dangers of that dream.

EN: Where does your interest in architecture derive from?

ES: People frequently pigeon hole what I do as work "about art history," and they think that my career started in 2004 with *89 seconds* and then *The Rape of the Sabine Women* -- when, in fact, I was making work for 20 years before that. At school I studied photography and print making, mostly, but when I moved to New York after school I became very interested in sculptural installation work, often accompanied by projection. I shot a lot of Super-8 and a lot with surveillance cameras.

But my early work all had a marked sculptural element, and frequently an architectural one as well. I did a number of works that involved architectural intervention and referenced cinema, without using cinematic tools. These days, I'm sort of trying to get back in that direction; the architectural interests that manifest in *whiteonwhite* are really a return to form for me.

EN: Were those early sculptural installation works intended as commentary -- ironic or otherwise -- on the idea of "better living through design," as well?

ES: Yes. It was about going into a piece of architecture and wanting fix it, asking, "How can I make this space more poetic or compelling?" In some ways, I would say that the way I've been shooting recently, for *algorithmicnoir*, is not about *physically* intervening so much as *visually* intervening, trying to figure out again what's interesting about a given place in terms of its architectural presence.

EN: Is there not something hubristic about that, as well? The desire to modify what is there according to your present moment and your needs?

ES: In a certain way, yes -- the question is, "how do you modify it to make it speak to you?" But the thing is, if you're interested in how people build spaces, there is also a desire to do it yourself. And I do; I have worked as a builder and as a contractor. Recently, I have felt a desire to veer back in the direction of that architectural interventionist work. I missed building things.

EN: There is a nice symmetry there, because even with your "non-sculptural" works, you create frameworks into which viewers are invited to project, which viewers are invited to adapt and modify. In *algorithmicnoir*, you give us these narrative structures but they are not complete or finite; that part is up to us.

ES: Right. It's also about trying to respect the intelligence of my audience. What's exciting to me with *algorithmicnoir* is that every viewer will come

away with a slightly different story, having seen actually different material -- different visual, different audio, etc. I want to the viewer to have space for his or her own ideas.

EN: How does the structure of the work relate to the title of the project, "white on white," which I assume refers to **Kazimir Malevich's** iconic Suprematist painting of the same title?

ES: For both me and for Jeff Wood, the project's lead actor and one of the writing collaborators, *whiteonwhite* was an over-arching project that picked up some of the concepts within Suprematism and the Suprematist language used in Malevich's writings, and took an interpretive, poetic approach to them. Malevich would frequently write things that he meant metaphorically, but we were interested in interpreting them literally. He'd write things like, "I'm going to leave the earth and go to space" -- and in *algorithmicnoir*, we give the impression that taking a journey in a rocket is something that our character literally desires.

One of Malevich's most famous utterances was, "Everything which we loved is lost. We are in a desert . . . Before us is nothing but a black square." In *algorithmicnoir*, we seek to access and represent in real life this emptiness that Malevich was looking for on the picture plane.

EN: It was said about Suprematism that it sought to "render the familiar landscape abstract." Do you relate to that goal?

ES: Yes. In a certain way, I think that's what the film wants to do. My interest has always been in discovering new ways to switch up the established narrative arc of things, to allow for individual interpretations of ideas or dynamics that might seem quotidian by suggesting alternative possibilities, and giving viewers the space to develop them.

EN: When you refer to the "established narrative arc" of something, which narrative history do you mean: film? Video art? Literature?

ES: I'm referencing traditional narrative in general. If I must place my work in a context, I'd rather it be in the continuum of filmmaking; if you're going to be didactic about it, you might say that video art derives from the performance art of the '70s while film doesn't -- not that one is better than the other. I just think film is more where my interests are and where my skills are; I'm not a performer.

EN: What is the distinction between the two traditions for you? Is it that video art frequently turns the camera inward on the performer and film is made in order to entertain, with an eye to the

audience?

ES: I don't know if I'd go that far; but film is about storytelling, and my interest has always been in discovering ways to push the envelope of what it means to tell a story. I think of highly influential films, like Jacques Rivette's *OUT 1* (1971), a 13-hour film with different narratives going on simultaneously, which takes the idea of improvisational narratives and the many lines that are tying them together, and explodes it. *OUT 1* made me understand a new set of possibilities, and I do hope to make work that relates to the history of film.

EN: So if the director's role is not to prescribe narrative for the viewer, what is his or her role?

ES: The director is a mediator, showing viewers the world. Recently, I saw *Ruhr* (2009), an amazing film by the director James Benning. *Ruhr* is comprised of a series of 20-minute, static takes of one scene -- the woods, the airport, smokestacks; and in those extremely static shots, there's still motion picture. It's still a narrative, but the work is about the viewer projecting his own ideas into this strong, locked vision. There is a static observation, but the director mediates the observation by presenting it to you. What's more compelling than discussing the differences between video art and film, though, is the crossover -- filmmakers trying to be more like video artists or experimental filmmakers and video artists trying to be like film directors. Meanwhile, I'm clearly operating from a position within the art world, but I'm always making this slightly circuitous effort to see if I can reach into that cinematic continuum.

That said, there is a stubbornness to video art that that I love. Claudia de Serpa Saures, a dancer/choreographer I have worked with, says, "I'm not here to entertain." I have huge respect for that. I think there is an impulse to fight against instant gratification in the histories of video art and experimental film, and often, with good work, there is this payoff for the patient viewer. The challenge I faced while making *whiteonwhite* was to make something that isn't delivering straight narrative or standard feature film fare, but captivates -- and actually isn't boring. I would like people to be able to lose themselves and get engrossed in the footage, as if they were watching a regular feature film, even though they're not. While I have respect for people who say, "I'm not here to entertain," I'm not about trying people's patience. I'm more interested in getting the viewer involved on a level where they never thought they would be.

EN: What decisions guided your choice of location for shooting?

ES: The idea of the expedition is paramount; if I'm going to set out to collect this research, I'm more interested in doing it in unfamiliar places; places where I understand very little, where I have to grapple with my own foreignness.

EN: Which brings me to the idea of "translation." *algorithmicnoir* takes place against a backdrop that is unfamiliar to many, and most of the actors don't speak English. How does that work with your conceit for the film?

ES: The absence of a common language meant that a lot of the improvisations were based on gesture, facial expression and body language. I think that so much of what we experience as good acting is actually not in the voice or words but in other things -- your body, your eyes, the way that you cross a room.

This has also been a continuing focus for me: the desire to access and communicate the invisible dynamics that are ultimately how we understand each other. For *The Rape* and *89 Seconds*, there was no spoken language used at all; in *algorithmicnoir*, we *are* using language, but we're hobbled by the fact that we didn't all speak the same language. Something about that linguistic breakdown really brings you back to the core of acting, and the core of what it means to communicate on film.

algorithmicnoir performs a number of translations simultaneously: there's the translation going on on-screen, there is every viewer's translation of the material into a narrative, there is the serendipity machine's translation of the algorithm into a "tagged" series of images. The language problem translates into what we do as people all day everyday in this world: take raw material and distill it via our experiences. That's what communication is; that what art-making is.

"whiteonwhite: algorithmicnoir," Sept. 15-Oct. 22, 2011, Cristin Tierney Gallery, 546 West 29th Street, New York, N.Y., 10001.

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