

Control Issues: Eve Sussman at the Toronto International Film Festival

By Andrea Carson
September 20th, 2011

I came across a quote from the YBA godfather, Michael Craig-Martin in the Financial Times recently. Speaking about the practice of being an artist, he says, “What interests me is the part of you that you are stuck with, that you can’t control, and it comes out whatever. That’s infinitely more profound: you are who you are, even when you don’t wish to be – you can’t not do it.”



Still from *whiteonwhite:algorithmic noir*, by Eve Sussman. Image courtesy redartprojects.com

His quote echoes an issue that I’ve had for some time with much of the emerging art that I see; the idea that the artist must maintain control over it. Of course, ultimately we can never get away from ourselves, so it’s true that all art is self-portraiture, but generally speaking, I much prefer art that leaves open what Craig-Martin identifies – that part that can’t be controlled.

Speaking of control, we saw the newest work by Brooklyn-based artist Eve Sussman and her collaborative team Rufus Corporation at the Toronto International Film Festival, where it was screening as a part of Future Projections, the festival’s artistic programme.

You may know Sussman’s amazing work *89 Seconds at Alcazar*, “a lavish and evocative re-creation of the moments leading up to and immediately following the scene portrayed in the beloved masterpiece *Las Meninas* (The Maids of Honor) painted by Diego Velázquez in 1656” according to Rice University Art Gallery, which screened the work in 2005.

Sussman’s newest, and quite different piece *whiteonwhite:algorithmic noir*, is billed as an ‘experimental film noir’. It is shot in the areas surrounding the Caspian sea, and is made up of a series of very brief film clips. It is a story of a man, on his own, possibly pursuing something or someone. There is an unsettling feeling as if he is running out of words, or the ability to speak. The narrative is deliberately fuzzy, and the intriguing part is that Sussman has custom-programmed a computer to sift through the clips, along with music and voiceovers, in order to ‘randomly’ select clips that flow together while still maintaining a semblance of narrative (of sorts.)

So the film, which is shot absolutely beautifully, is intriguing to watch, and keeps you in a state of suspense, since you know that it doesn’t really end, and yet you are seduced by the unusual, painterly images of a part of the world – mostly Kazakhstan – that most of us won’t be particularly familiar with.

That the viewer is engaged in a somewhat unclear, neverending story that no single person has control over is a lot like life, actually. The computer screen, however is included in the screening room and is visible so that you can see the code running down as searches are performed and executed, one by one in synch with what you are watching. I can understand why Sussman would find this approach interesting. It's like a patchwork or like a grand painting using film clips rather than paintstrokes, and it tells us much more about the process of making than about the final product.

The artist creates the pieces, and the software puts them together. Of course, the idea of randomness is misleading – Sussman and her team chose the tag words that allowed the computer to select images, but this would have been necessary likely to ensure a sense of continuity.

In a way, Sussman has found an intriguing and quite modern way of both controlling and relinquishing control of her artwork. It's a great experience and I highly recommend it.

It is presently having it's New York premiere screening at Cristin Tierney Gallery through Oct 22, and will travel to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in the spring of 2012.