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Eve Sussman

by Matvei Yankelevich

Eve Sussman swerved up to the Old American Can Factory in her pickup to rescue me and my bike from the summer rain. We barreled down backstreets toward her live-work place near the Williamsburg Bridge, chatting away about our newly discovered mutual friend, the Algerian poet Samira Negrouche. Beneath Sussman's kitchen window—a wall of glass the dimensions of a movie screen—the Brooklyn Navy Yard laid itself out like a blueprint. Beyond it, hazy bridges shot out over the bulging East River waters. Icy mint tea in hand, we went into the colossal curtained darkness of her studio and she pressed a button. I watched the flat-screen open up to Kazakh deserts, heaps of discarded technology, the evaporating sea, chemical factories mingling with living rooms, wandering souls with hidden motivations, unanswered questions in each window of endless Soviet apartment blocks, and space always folding in on itself, time folding around it. Voices seemed to be whispering misleading answers in my ear, and the rainy Brooklyn streets were suddenly very far away. Eve Sussman and Rufus Corporation's long-term collaborative effort, whiteonwhite:algorithmicnoir, was taking over the loft. Out of the corner of my eye I could see the greenish-white box of a cursor flashing on the nearby computer screen. It blurted out

strings of words now and again, then paused, pulsating, seeming to ponder the scene, thinking about the next cut. Sussman's fleetingly allegorical and seemingly self-generating sci-fi film—which premieres in its complete state this September at the Toronto International Film Festival and at Cristin Tierney Gallery in New York City—inherits the tradition of Godard's Alphaville, Tarkovsky's Stalker, Fassbinder's World on a Wire, and Resnais's Last Year at Marienbad. Even with the volume turned off, whiteonwhite continued to mesmerize me as we chatted about its making, and about Eve's earlier projects: at one point I had to ask her to turn it off so I could be released from its grasp on my mind, which the film commandeered on a trip to many places other than the one where I was supposed to be conducting this interview—perhaps into the future, or space itself.

Matvei Yankelevich How much of whiteonwhite am I seeing?

Eve Sussman It's hard to say. There are 30 hours—about 3,000 clips—of film/video footage that is reordering itself all the time, so the film always plays differently. To hear all of the spoken material might take . . . four hours?

MY What's the basic story line?

ES The story ekes out over time—you might start to piece it together after an hour. There's an underlying noirish narrative about a protagonist named Holz, played by Jeff Wood. Mr. Holz ends up in a place called City-A in search of a job. He gets coerced into working for the New Method Oil Well Cementing Company. He notices oddities: language is rationed, time is being manipulated, New Method may not be in the oil business, there's a water factory producing three types of water, the water is spiked with lithium that renders a complacent workforce oblivious to time manipulations. Those are some of the details of the story. There are pieces that are clearly fiction and narrations based on places we went to—we were primarily in Aktau in Kazakhstan, an uranium-mining boomtown in the '60s and '70s.

He never imagined the language ration would be delivered upon him.
—like a person never really thinks he will be the one to get cancer.
He was not extravagant or verbose.
Therefore he was surprised when he woke up one day
and had lost the use of a few odd adjectives,
two simple articles: “the” and “an”
One noun: “egg”
And an adverb: “typically”
—excerpt: Language Ration Part 3

MY What’s going on with the sound?

ES There are different categories of sound: narrations and conversations, which play as voice-overs; music/sound designs, clips in which I’ve dubbed speaking; and clips that have their original audio. I love the potential of dubbing—you can make people on the screen say anything, which makes editing a feature film more fun.

MY So synced sound is not always in sync?

ES No, not always. Sometimes it’s just a suggestion of picture and sound that you meld together. Algis Kizys—one of the five musicians who put compositions in the machine—has created score segments that we’ve treated like voice-overs, although they don’t have any narration. We’ve tagged the sounds to pull up footage that will give the impression of synchronicity—so you hear a train, for instance, and the algorithm pulls up footage of a train.

MY Tell me more about the “machine.”

ES Initially, when our programmer, Jeff Garneau, developed the computer algorithm that we call the Serendipity Machine, I thought of it as a tool for making a movie. It was a studio device

that Kevin Messman, the editor, and I would use to generate ideas. I'm looking for chance-generated poetic juxtapositions. The machine can give us more choices than we could ever generate ourselves. I wouldn't have put the naked model next to the shot of the velodrome with blue light, for instance, but when I see it, it feels meaningful. I imagined we'd use this idea-generating device as a means to edit the movie. But the machine got away from us. It developed a life of its own. About a year ago we started doing work-in-progress screenings, first here in Brooklyn at Momenta, then at MoMA and at The Modern in Fort Worth. This September is the premiere, at which point we will stop adding narrative and visual data to the hard drive. But the piece is organic; in theory, we could add new material forever.

MY At the premiere, how long will it run?

ES It will run until we turn it off.

MY As a loop?

ES It's not a loop. We turn it on and don't turn it off until the show is over five weeks later. It will never repeat the same way twice. It will never give you the same constellation of clips, edits, voice-overs, and sound. The algorithmic movie does something that's a little bit like daily life. You can walk the same path every day—most days it's not especially memorable—but every now and then something happens that's incredibly memorable. The path is set up by the voice-overs. Hopefully, the algorithm will make something happen along that path that is striking. I want it to feel like a movie that's always changing.

MY What about the long interludes?

ES Between voice-overs, the algorithm picks a random amount of time and plays a clip based on the last tag. For your viewing it happened to pick some long clips.

MY Tell me about this town where you shot most of the footage.

ES Aktau, an industrial shit hole on the Caspian Sea. It's not really a sea, more like a brackish lake. "The armpit of the universe," is how our archaeologist friends described it. Aktau was built as a Soviet enclave. Everything is planned and numbered. Our first address was 3-16-12, like a combination lock. We became mesmerized by the city because it represented a dream of a utopian future in the desert, where there's no water. They built a nuclear power plant to make the water so they could mine the minerals and hydrocarbons. When the Soviet Union fell apart, Aktau fell into disrepair. Now there's an oil boom just to the north, in the Tengizchevroil fields, and the '60s prefab "Krushchyovka" apartment blocks in Aktau are being clad with mirrors, glass, and chrome to look like Las Vegas or Dubai.

MY Wow.

ES It's the literal conflation of communism and capitalism in the architecture that's so ironic.

MY In the story there's this love intrigue—

ES It's insinuated. It might be the woman, called "Dispatch," who's giving Holz orders over the

phone. Or it could be someone else.

MY And Holz has various other contacts . . . one with a kind of British voice?

> **WHITE** So how long you been in the region? Lonely?
> **HOLZ** Those are two different questions. Which question would you like me to answer?
> **WHITE** Y'know, do you miss home? Miss those kids you used to teach?
> **HOLZ** No.
> —excerpt: Mr. Holz/Mr. White interview

ES It's actually Australian. That character is Mr. White (voiced by Jim White). He is one of the expat bosses of the New Method Oil Well Cementing Company, which was Halliburton's original name. Halliburton is everywhere you find oil. In the new oil-rich regions, if a prop plane with ten people on it lands in any little cinder-block airport in the middle of the desert, half of them likely work for Halliburton. I became curious about Halliburton's history. Originally they were just a concrete company, cementing wells. We imagined a bunch of thugs (picture There Will Be Blood). They've cornered contracts for all the big oil companies and the US military. The fact that a hundred years ago their original name was the New Method Oil Well Cementing Company says it all. I had to take that name!

MY Tell me about the history of the project. Why these particular places? Were you riding around Central Asia looking for this project?

ES I'm a big believer in the expedition, in going places where you understand very little. The process is organic. Jeff Wood, whom I've worked with since 2003, had been thinking about space; we were also interested in Malevich's painting White on White. The conflation of the two pointed

us toward the Baikonur Cosmodrome in the middle of the Kazakh steppe. Most manned space flights launch from Baikonur. Today, July 8th, was the last launch of the US space shuttle.

MY Today? You're kidding me!

ES It's the end of the shuttle. The US no longer has human launch capability. They're sending only four guys because who's going to have to bring them back? The guys at Baikonur—in a Soyuz rocket that launches from the Cosmodrome. That's the rich irony, all this American ambition in the history of the Russian–American space race and now we can send our guys up there, but the only people who can bring them back are the Russians. They're using the same technology that Yuri Gagarin used.

MY In the film you have images of the Gagarin office.

ES We did a gallery installation called Yuri's Office based on a photograph I took in Gagarin's office, which is kept exactly as it was the day he died. It's in Star City, completely museumified. It feels almost as religious as Lenin's tomb.

MY Why White on White?

ES It all started as a joke. We had done the films 89 Seconds at Alcázar, based on Velázquez's Las Meninas, and The Rape of the Sabine Women, somewhat inspired by the David painting. A friend of mine said, "Eve, there's gotta be a third painting!" I said, "I don't have to make another piece about a painting. I don't even know much about painting!" But he kept on me. So very sarcastically I said, "Okay, White on White by Malevich." It seemed like the obvious, fuck-you response. A painting of a white square on a white square.

Simultaneously, Jeff Wood was following space travel and the burgeoning space-tourism business. Malevich's phrase "I am the commissar of space" became an inspiration. We talked about space and the concepts of transcendence in Suprematism, playing with the double entendres that you can read into the formal language of the Suprematist manifestos. Jeff kept repeating, "I'm gonna go to space." My reaction was, Yeah, right. I'm not interested in going to space, but I'm really interested in watching you try. I initially thought it would be a comedy. I said, "Let's go to Baikonur and see what happens." So we tried.

Baikonur is a walled enclave, surrounded by a white concrete wall, a bit like old West Berlin, except there are these white concrete, diamond-shaped gates. The Cosmodrome is inside a Kazakh town called Tyuratam—a little one-horse town, outside the walled city. When you pass through the "pearly gates" you are not in Kazakhstan anymore, you are in Russia.

MY You are in Russia? They rent it?

ES Yes. The Russian Federation has a rental agreement in the middle of the Kazakh desert.

MY What's the population?

ES 5,000 people.

MY Kazakhs?

ES Mixed. People work there. Normally, to enter Baikonur you have to apply through a space-tourism agency, or finagle your way into the NASA delegation. The US space program sends a delegation to Baikonur every time they launch their astronauts—I mean, there's a launch every week.

MY Every week?

ES Not manned; commercial unmanned launches. The Russians have figured out how to keep their space program going. They've commercialized it. If you pay 30 million dollars to the Russian space program, they'll take you up. It's a no-brainer. The Russian Federation is saving their space program; ours is a shadow of its former self.

MY It's commercial, not only in terms of passengers?

ES All sorts of satellites are being sent from Baikonur; all the mobile-phone companies' ones, for instance.

MY We've lost a lot of business that way.

ES Seems so. They're so much more savvy, the Russians, you know?

MY Guess I'm not one of the savvy ones.

ES My favorite joke about the space program: The Americans spent a million dollars trying to figure out how to make a ballpoint pen that would write in space. The Russians said, "We'll take a pencil." When you go to Star City and Energia—where they build the rockets—and see the things they sent up, it's unbelievable. They look like a bunch of car batteries strapped together with duct tape and wire. Then came a car battery strapped together with duct tape, wire, and a lot of explosives, with a dog inside. Later it's an asbestos ball with a lot of batteries, and duct tape, and wire, and explosives, with a person inside. It's just so ballsy—and it's not that Americans aren't, hence the classic competition.

MY The shuttle was so presentable.

ES Exactly. Star City looks like an abandoned 1950s college campus. You can't imagine anybody is working there; there are no lawns, no grooming, nothing's painted. Everything is crumbling. Americans love their window-dressing; Russians don't give a fuck.

MY So you made it to Baikonur?

ES On the train we met a Kazakh college student who grew up in Baikonur. He had about ten words of English. He thought with our double-entry Russian visas they'd let us in. We get to Baikonur and of course the guards are totally suspicious. They aren't gonna let us go and they aren't gonna let us inside . . . and they have our passports. Hours later, a Russian plainclothes security guy appears. With about 15 words of English he manages to make us understand that we have to apply to the FSB—the new incarnation of the KGB—and get clearance. By then it's 10:00 PM and completely dark. We're instructed to get into the supervisor's car. He says he's taking us to the train. He promptly turns the car around and drives into the walled city. Suddenly we're inside the town that we were forbidden to enter! For a moment it seemed like we were being abducted. They must have decided that letting these foreigners just walk away wasn't the right thing to do. They needed to check us out.

MY How much of Baikonur did you see?

ES Unfortunately, we could make out very little in the dark—some statues, rocket monuments . . . They brought us to the Baikonur police station and the scenario went on for five hours, involving complete handprints and iris prints, copying every page of our passports, and having us each write a little bio. At 3:00 AM the security supervisor takes us in his car. As soon as he clears the gates it becomes obvious he's never been outside of Baikonur. Flights go directly from their little Russian enclave to Mother Russia and never touch Kazakh soil. He got—

MY —Lost!?

ES Completely. The train station is five minutes from the city, but he doesn't know that. Finally he finds it and makes it very clear that we are not allowed to step off that platform and have got to get on the next train. At 5:00 AM we board a train to Aralsk, one of the biggest environmental-disaster sites in the world, where there are ship graveyards on the salt flats. From there we continued to Aktau, the numbered city that has the logic of a circuit board and where we got hooked on the idea of the retro-future noir. Our initial reaction was: this is an industrial wasteland, there's nothing attractive or redeemable about the architecture or the master plan. But the more you look, you realize it's brilliant—the kind of mind-set that initiates the vision to build a utopian "paradise" in a place where it's untenable to live.

MY So how do they actually get water?

ES They pull it from the Caspian and desalinate it to make fresh water, which takes huge amounts of energy. So there's an irony, both in the architecture and in the making of water. "Making Water" smacks of hubris and suggests narrative.

MY Can you talk about the obsolete technology?

ES Oh, like in the factory?

MY Even the typewriter, the tape recorder that Holz is using, all the clocks and the watches, and the watch-repair scene.

ES We had the idea that part of the movie should take place in the 1970s. So we chose technology from that time. The clocks are there to reference the voice-overs about manipulated time and the "flip clocks" that predated digital clocks—they were supposed to look futuristic but were analog.

MY What made that choice appealing?

ES Everywhere we went we found a little museum. The oil company, the water factory, the library, the art school, they all have museums. In Aktau, in the water-factory's museum, you understand that in the 1960s the place was cutting edge. Display cases had photos of the guys who ran it. They looked like they walked out of a 1973 East German fashion magazine with their plaid, the haircuts, the mustaches, the big glasses. The dated look of the machines and the people fit the noir story we were devising as we traveled. And much of what is there is not obsolete—the factory interior you see with all the dials is a functioning chemical factory.

MY I thought it was a set!

ES No, it's a functioning chemical plant. Everybody in those scenes, except Jeff, and the girlfriend of our translator, are workers.

MY And they were okay with you filming?

ES Yes. We had an amazing fixer, Vlad, a local Russian dude, whom we found in Aktau. A six-foot-five, Harley–riding Slav, who sang lead in a cover band at the expat joint Guns-n-Roses when he wasn't running his production company making industrial videos for corporations and the local Mangystau government. Most of what's happening in Kazakhstan is foreign multinational-governmental coproductions. Vlad had cornered the market on making all their videos. He was a big man around town, literally.

MY So Vlad knew all of the people in the plants?

ES He knew everyone and reveled in his local status: "You need the inside of that factory? I can get you in." The factory was built in the 1950s and has not changed. Everything is analog. That roll of paper with the needle and red ink you saw—some kind of analog pressure gauge—they dip it in the red ink and the little lines tell them if one of their vats of chemicals is about to explode.

MY Tell me about the Kid.

ES In Aktau we meet a kid on the beach who dresses like a homeboy from Chicago. He's smart and interested. He comes to visit us where we're living. He enters our apartment and is immediately at home. From a Western perspective his comfort level is surprising; it's born of a

social equality left over from Soviet times. He goes into the kitchen and makes tea without us telling him where anything is. We offer him a role in the film. He is excited about it. We improvise a few scenes with him. Six months later, Artur has become reticent about working with us. When we return the third time, Artur has become devoutly religious. He has decided that to act in a film "is haraam." He says, "It's forbidden, I can't do it."

By now he prays five times a day. Most Kazakhs are not very religious. One Kazakh businessman we knew blamed imams from Iran, whose teachings have nothing to do with Kazakh culture, for the conversion of young men. People in Kazakhstan practice a form of Sufi Islam. It is very open; men and women go on pilgrimages together, eat together, sleep as a group in the same room. It's completely different from any practice of Islam I've seen in the Middle East.

MY How does religion work in City-A in the film?

ES City-A is all about the desire to build the beautiful place and the perfect future. Religious desire is one form of transcendent desire. Whether you seek that goal with a rocket or by creating a sublime white-on-white painting, through futuristic architecture, or through a covenant with God, it's all about transcendence.

HOLZ Why did you convert to Islam?
KID Because I wanted to know why we are here.
HOLZ And now you know?
KID Yes.
HOLZ So why are we here?
KID To go to paradise.
—excerpt: Mr. Holz and the Kid

MY And City-A is a kind of paradise on Earth.

ES A paradise that looks like the apocalypse. You see broken-down equipment, garbage, and crows flying around.

MY You're talking about a utopian project that is obviously failing. Everyone is drugged with lithium, moving a little slower. Actually, it's not that bad. It's like any place in the provinces where time is slowed down.

ES One voice-over asks: "Do you like our city? Doesn't it function flawlessly? Isn't it beautiful?" It's all in the eye of the beholder.

MY You're talking about transcendence, but Malevich's White on White is also about emptiness. What the Kid feels about the supposed transcendence of this utopian town is that it is empty, that he needs to find out how to get to paradise. So paradise becomes separate from, rather than identical to, this city, right?

ES That's a great way to describe it. Talking to you now is helping to complete the circle. If you have this supposedly flawless paradise on Earth but you still have that desire for something else—something "other"—then transcendence becomes the only hope. If it is not readily available in the place you're locked into—which might be City-A or might be the planet—then your choices are space or paradise. They are one and the same. And they both feel suicidal.

MY Well Malevich talks about leaving the Earth behind.

ES Does he?

MY In his early writings, after painting The Black Square and other "discoveries," as he calls them. Malevich's language is always infused with the discourse of science and experimentation, but it's very clear that he foregrounds the intuitive discovery from which he later develops ideas—the discovery itself is just something he happens upon, from which he can then discern laws of form.

ES The beauty and irony is that at the end he was dismissed as a mystic. He became too religious about his science.

MY He was a mystic, I think.

ES He got kicked out of the Communist Party; the prestige that surrounded his earlier career fell away.

MY The Soviet Union didn't need a "commissar of space." That job was not being offered.

ES I love the line about Malevich in Jeff's travelogue "Monuments of Fire": "He declared, 'I am the Ambassador of Space.' Then he promptly went back to radical figurative portraiture, like any good cosmonaut who makes it out alive."

MY I love those late paintings. Western art historians often see it as a regression, as Malevich's weaker work—if it's not abstraction or "non-objective" painting, if it becomes representational or

figurative, it's considered no longer radical—or not politically radical. But those pieces are actually really radical; they are weird and Renaissance-like. In some ways they are like the sets that you're showing in whiteonwhite—sometimes they're real places—but they're intensely organized spaces.

ES There was this intense order in mid-century design.

MY Your work starts with Malevich's White on White and the very static idea of the desert that he talks about, the desire to go to the desert—a space that has possibilities for transcendence because of its emptiness. How did you unfold a story from these static images? Is that where the machine comes in?

ES Narrative growing out of static images—the desert, the museumified office, the factory space, or the pipes—is interesting because it defies the stillness. The stillness is aching for a story to be grafted on to it, to explain why it is so still. When we made the first iterations of the randomizer without any algorithm it picked clips and played them randomly, suggesting a narrative.

MY And your location seems outside of time. This '70s thing.

ES There are so many narratives you can spin out with the idea of being locked in time, e.g. the clocks are slowed down. Why are these people outside of time? Are they on drugs? Is it the future? But it looks like 1973.

Being presented with a static image you have to ask how it became that way. Nothing is really static. You have to work really hard to keep something from changing. If you want to keep Gagarin's office looking like his office, somebody has to take care of it or it will fall apart: the wind will blow, the rain will come in, and things will get lost. So I see these static images as rich with potential narrative. The shot with all the piled-up computers and ancient radio transmitters just begs so many questions—what were people communicating with these things?

MY whiteonwhite has a Stalker-esque feeling to it.

ES Actually, Simon Lee and I want to do this project—Tarkovsky's Stalker as a play here in Williamsburg. There is this beautiful vacant lot that looks like the Zone and we are thinking of doing Stalker as a live theater piece, crossing it with—you may or may not like this—Winnie-the-Pooh.

MY That's hilarious.

ES Well, we think it could work. They are kind of the same. In Winnie-the-Pooh they go into the woods and whatever they try to do fails and in Stalker they go into the Zone and it's the same thing. And you have parallel characters: Stalker is Christopher Robin, Writer could be Eeyore, and Scientist could be Owl. It would be an installation/performance piece. For sure, Tarkovsky—Stalker and The Mirror—was on my mind a lot with whiteonwhite.

MY Because of?

ES The structure of The Mirror and the structure created by the voice-overs and the Serendipity Machine are related. I even lifted one line from The Mirror, in the Wintergarden voice-over:

> Have we become bourgeois without owning private property?

MY I hadn't thought about it, but now I see it in the way you work with reflective imagery.

ES Reflection and ideas about memory.

MY Yeah, reconstructing a history without knowing what it is.

ES Deriving narrative from these static locations; sometimes they feel so empty that almost anything could happen there, and inevitably something does happen. Like we get inside some crazy chemical company that's been the same for 50 years or we meet two withered archaeologists who send us to Aktau. So some of these ideas are derived from the process of being on the road.

MY You've structured the project as an ongoing experience that can keep growing. There's this sense of never quite resolving the questions that Holz, the geophysicist, has.

ES Exactly. That characteristic of the machine is also built into the narrative. Holz never answers his questions and never leaves City-A. For the last year and a half we've been updating the media, adding new narratives and clips to the hard drive. Initially I thought the piece could grow forever. Now I see it can't go on endlessly. I like the possibility that you can experience the film like life—you turn around a corner; it might be the same corner you've turned around a million times but you see something you've never seen before.

MY Or—vice versa—you see the same thing.