

# EVE SUSSMAN AND THE RUFUS CORPORATION



The question of why Kazimir Malevich, painter of the *Black Square* (1915), inventor of Suprematism, plowhead of Russian Modernism and sacrifice of the Soviet avant-garde, turned, or rather returned, during the 1930s, to painting odd, faceless, geometricised peasants has yet to be answered fully or forcefully. That this self-proclaimed ‘commissar of space’, who had once enlisted himself with Velimir Khlebnikov and Aleksei Kruchenykh – the ‘men of the future’ (*budetliane*) – in a battle to gain ‘victory over the sun’, retreated to the precincts of indigenous mysticism and donned the vestments of religion (Malevich’s final self-portrait, from 1933, shows the artist as church father) troubles any mind that desires the genuine venture of thought, be it artistic, scientific or intellectual breakthrough, to open onto the promise of some future free from the shackles of the present, let alone the past. And yet perhaps what Malevich was grappling with during the 1930s was not so much the past as a different conception of the future, and how one could get there.

Malevich, the good modernist, had a time problem, and at its root was film. Caught out by Sergei Eisenstein’s and Dziga Vertov’s masterworks of the 1920s, and with them the rise of filmic and photographic montage

as the inevitable visual language of the revolution, Malevich’s commitment to painting could only appear quaint at best and counterrevolutionary at worst. Art historian Margarita Tupitsyn has argued convincingly however that even by 1920 Malevich had begun thinking filmically. In the small booklet *Suprematism: 34 Drawings*, published that year, Malevich projected one abstract sketch after another within, or rather upon, a drawn frame. Like a film, Malevich saw this work as ‘one piece, with no visible joints’ – he called it a ‘suprematist apparatus’. ‘It was a mechanism’, Tupitsyn says, ‘meant to operate without its inventor’.<sup>1</sup>

Like their previous two films, *89 Seconds at Alcázar* (2004), a dilation of the moment depicted in Velázquez’s *Las Meninas* (1656), and *The Rape of the Sabine Women* (2006), which dramatises the suspension of time pictured in that painting (by Rubens) and its cognates (by David), the latest film by Eve Sussman and the Rufus Corporation (her ever-evolving studio of collaborators), *whiteonwhite:algorithmicnoir* (2011), which completes the trilogy, nods in the direction of another painting – Malevich’s *Composition: White on White* (1918). And it, too, is a mechanism that operates without its inventor.

Leaving aside for a moment just what the film may be about, *whiteonwhite*’s ‘apparatus’ consists of 30-plus hours of video, film, music and voiceovers, all of which have been captured as digital files and tagged with terms – ‘dance’, ‘white’, ‘past’, ‘future’, ‘happy’, ‘mission’, ‘surveillance’ – that relate, sometimes directly, but most of the time only loosely, to their contents. These files are then given over to an algorithm that Sussman and her programmer, Jeff Garneau, have taken to calling ‘the serendipity machine’, which uses those tags and other metadata in the digital files to determine what to play, when to play it and for how long. The algorithm’s many variables (‘CROSSFADE\_LENGTH=’ or ‘RANDOMIZE=’ or ‘VOICEOVER\_INTERRUPTS\_VIDEO=’, to name just a few) can be set or ‘tuned’ to different values, so that the

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words JONATHAN T.D. NEIL

<sup>1</sup> See Margarita Tupitsyn, *Malevich and Film* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, in association with Fundação Centro Cultural de Belém, 2002), 25.

left: *whiteonwhite:algorithmicnoir*, 2011







left: **whiteonwhite:**  
**algorithmicnoir**, 2011

below: **whiteonwhite:**  
**algorithmicnoir**, 2011

film emerges as a function of the algorithm that generates or edits, in real time, the ordering of images and sounds that the audience sees and hears, and so experiences, as the work.

There is no beginning or middle or end to *whiteonwhite*, nor is there any potential for systematic repetitions (as one finds in the temporally extended but ultimately looped work of artists such as Stan Douglas or Douglas Gordon). There does remain, however, a narrative arc. But it is an arc that belongs neither wholly to the film (there is no finished thing that can be called that) nor to the audience. As filmmaker Hollis Frampton once noted, no matter how abstract or repetitious the work (but especially with abstract and repetitious work), the viewer always projects the arc of her own experience, from initial engagement, to subtle distraction, to not-so-subtle boredom, to anticipation of – indeed often hope for – an ending. This is not at all what it is like to watch *whiteonwhite*, because the experience of watching it is, to say the least, engrossing, if not actually entertaining.

The film's clips, shot over the course of two years in Kazakhstan, reveal what Sussman terms a 'portrait of capitalism', but 'capitalist uncanny' might be more apt. Sussman's cameras have captured a sublime landscape (urban, industrial, rural, with no clear demarcations between) that is being stretched across an event horizon separating the vacuum of a once-slow-moving communist economy from the rapidly accelerating market for the region's untapped natural resources and all the wealth that goes with them. Which is why much of the film looks like it was shot and takes place during the 1970s, even as signs of the future (our own present) crop up in such things as new car models and all-glass office towers.

Such uneven developments lie at the core of the action, too. We learn, for example, that a geophysicist, Mr Holz, played by Jeff Wood, may or may not have some work to do for the New Method Oil Well Cementing Company (apparently Halliburton's original corporate name). Just what Holz is meant to do is never very clear, nor is it

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ever clear just what New Method is after. We see Holz in a 1960s-era control room and out in a desert populated by oil pumps. We see Holz in the office of Yuri Gagarin (the first man in space) imagining the ascent of a model rocket. There is, in voiceover, talk of water desalination. There is talk of lithium in the water supply to pacify the population of the fictional City-A (played by the Kazakh city of Aktau, à la Paris in Godard's *Alphaville*, from 1965). There is talk of the city as a machine. There is talk with a mysterious female 'dispatch'. There is talk of a diminishing vocabulary and a diminished memory, which Holz makes up for through the use of an old reel-to-reel tape recorder. There is talk, by one Mr White, a superior at New Method, of those tapes holding more than Holz lets on. And there is talk about how time in City-A, and for Mr Holz, isn't adding up.

Because of all this, and in classic noir fashion, Holz often appears lost to himself. He is disconnected from his own agency, seemingly a pawn of some mystery intelligence that moves him across the bleak game board of the film. It's as if he can't be sure that the decisions he is making or the actions he is taking are his own or someone



else's. And so Holz becomes an allegory of the apparatus of *whiteonwhite* itself. He is a shuttle passing back and forth between making sense of his situation – just as the viewer attempts to make sense of what is unfolding on the screen – and coming to terms with the fact that there may be no sense at all to be made. After all, it is only a machine that is doing the unfolding. As one voiceover says in the film, “You are wrong, Mr Holz, our city is not a machine.” But of course it's the machine that has chosen for us to hear this, and again, it's a machine that operates without its inventor.<sup>2</sup>

Like the alien planet of Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris* (1961), *whiteonwhite* is a surface with no 'inside' to which we might ascribe a rationale, a motive, a reason for acting, even as it displays, like Lem's planet, fascinating yet fleeting architectures and zones and scenes that would seem to be put there for the purpose of our aesthetic satiation. In a sense, the world of *whiteonwhite* must remain wholly inscrutable to us. It stands as some radically other thing because we cannot access the intelligence behind it, perhaps like the radically Other itself, be it Lem's alien being or the Absolute. As Lem writes in *Solaris*, 'Where there are no men, there cannot be motives accessible to men. Before we can proceed with our research, either our own thoughts or their materialized forms must be destroyed.' One imagines Malevich writing this in 1915.

But it is Jeff Wood (Mr Holz), writing in an online travelogue that he and Sussman kept of their shooting trips to Central Asia in 2008, who both echoes and extends Lem's epistemology and makes the return to Malevich explicit: 'It is possible, reflecting on the torture that one must endure in the effortlessness of space, it is possible to imagine an inverse of Malevich's all-reflecting and annihilating *Black Square*. That is, by annihilating oneself, and one's attachments to the most fundamental elements of life: gravity, atmospheric pressure, endemic supply of oxygen and nitrogen... by annihilating oneself, we may attain the most iconic, aerial and representational vision possible: the Earth, real and abstract.' *Composition: White on White* was that inverse. It marked the beginning of Malevich's return to earth, via those peasants, at once 'real and abstract', whose remit it had always been to work and live within its limits.

This, then, is what I take *whiteonwhite* to be about: as a 'portrait of capitalism', it is a picture of, to use Susan Buck-Morss's phrase, the 'dreamworld and catastrophe' of our new nature – an environment so totally suffused and saddled with the ambitions and outcomes of human action that it is impossible to imagine such action taking place against a backdrop that is still somehow alien to it. There is no more undiscovered country here. In scene after scene in *whiteonwhite*, what remains of the natural world (steppe, mountains, seascapes) all bears the stamp of human mismanagement (whip-scar roadways, forgotten and defunct equipment, brackish waters). It's beautiful, but it's a beauty drained of hope.

<sup>2</sup> With all of this I am tempted to note that Sussman's *whiteonwhite: algorithmic noir*, as a 'portrait of capitalism' and at the same time a portrait of the character Holz, stands diametrically opposed to Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno's *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait* (2006), at least as the eminent critic Michael Fried understands it. In that film, the 'subject', Zinedine Zidane, the celebrated France and Real Madrid footballer, is captured by 17 different cameras that follow his every movement and action, both on and off the ball, during a home match against rival Spanish club Villarreal. For Fried, Gordon and Parreno's film offers an undeniable extension of what he calls the 'absorptive tradition' that began in the eighteenth century with artists such as Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin and Jean-Baptiste Greuze, insofar as the film pictures Zidane's total attention to and immersion in the match, even as the film reveals, through subtitles and camerawork, how he must be acutely aware of being watched by thousands of fans in the stadium and millions of TV viewers at home. The portrait that Gordon and Parreno 'paint' – and it is important that the total control that Zidane exhibits on the field is mirrored by the precise directorial control Gordon and Parreno exert over their film – is one of this dual 'mindedness', which at once glorifies and reveals the ultimate fragility of such self-possession. However else Holz's mindedness might be characterised, one wouldn't call it self-possession. Holz is equally and undeniably absorbed in the world of *whiteonwhite*, but whatever 'self' he might possess, he certainly isn't in control of it, and it is questionable whether it is even his to begin with.

When hope did pervade this picture, we called it modernity, and its arrow of time, its temporality, was two-dimensional – past and future – which is why its dominant aesthetic genres were either historicist or futurist. Over the past 40 years, however, we have come to recognise that that name and that temporality no longer hold. History became one more territory to colonise; the future, as social and technological progress, was cashiered for mere novelty. Various candidate replacements have been offered up – postmodernity, posthistory, contemporaneity – and genre itself as a category is suspect. Yet none of this is quite satisfactory either.

So let me venture this: *Sustainability*.

Sustainability not as a goal or an ethics, nor as a qualifier of what already exists (eg, sustainable design, sustainable agriculture, sustainable economics), but sustainability as a time (our own), a periodisation, and as a form of temporality that *whiteonwhite* tries to model for us. For this is not a film that simply looks backwards in order to move forward – that would be a modernist move – nor is it one that simply exchanges the deep time of modernity for the more horizontally distributed and synchronic field theories of postmodernity or contemporaneity or posthistory. Rather, in its embrace of technology to 'tune' multiple overlapping, independent temporalities – the personal (Holz's), the social (City-A's), the economic (New Method's), the geological (earth's), the machinic (the algorithm's), the systemic (capitalism's), the physical (space-time itself), to name just a handful – with the only one that we can actually access ourselves (without it having to be represented for us), which is just the experience of watching the film as it unfolds some horizon of meaningfulness, a connection or communication that we can never be sure of, like some alien handshake, *whiteonwhite* puts us in contact with a temporality for which we are largely responsible, but also a temporality that we have nevertheless been given, like a gift, to inhabit. *Whiteonwhite* models for us sustainable time, even as it wraps itself in a vision of a world that has run out of it. •

*whiteonwhite:algorithmic noir* is being screened in the New Frontiers section of the Sundance Film Festival, Park City, on 22, 24 and 25 January, and at SFMOMA, San Francisco, in March



left: *whiteonwhite: algorithmic noir*, 2011