



Above: Eve Sussman in Berlin. Opposite: *Empty Set*, a production still from the video *89 Seconds at Alcázar*, inspired by Diego Velázquez's painting *Las Meninas*, seen in foreground

IN THE
STUDIO

EVE SUSSMAN

>> WHETHER TIGHTLY CHOREOGRAPHED
OR LOOSELY IMPROVISED,
SUSSMAN'S LUSH VIDEOS BRING
FAMILIAR IMAGES TO LIFE

BY CAROL KINO PHOTOGRAPHS BY BENEDIKT PARTENHEIMER



IT DOESN'T SEEM EASY for video artist Eve Sussman to explain how she goes about making her works. Perhaps that's because she is often trying to apply her feverish energy to many things at once. "I get pulled into so many distractions, it's amazing," she says.

Outside the loft where she lives and works, in Brooklyn's rapidly gentrifying South Williamsburg neighborhood, construction workers are running heavy machinery. Inside, the buzz of activity is equally intense. Sussman shares her work space with anywhere from 25 to 60 artistic collaborators—including actors, cinematographers and editors—who form a loose collective known as the Rufus Corporation. Her husband, the installation artist and sculptor Simon Lee, lives and works in his own loft upstairs. "We visit each other," says Sussman.

On this particular day, she is supposed to be editing her new video, *The Rape of the Sabine Women*, which is being shown in a rough cut July 6 through September 24 at the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University in North Carolina. Loosely based on the Roman myth, it is being assembled from more than 100 hours of footage shot with a cast of 800—if you count extras—at eight primary locations in Berlin, Athens and the Greek island of Hydra.

In one corner of the studio, Sussman's co-editor, Kevin Messman, is hunkered over a computer. Other collaborators are packing photographs and pinch-hitting with miscellaneous production chores. Sussman's production manager and general aide-de-camp, Catherine Mahoney, is making phone calls and fielding some of the project's seemingly endless organizational details—jobs that Sussman sometimes shares. "I'm a micromanager," she admits. "But I'm the one who started the company, so it's kind of on my shoulders to make

sure we don't go bankrupt." (Sussman formed the Rufus Corporation about a year and a half ago, when she began production on *Sabine Women*.)

This week, Sussman has an additional project on her hands: a book version of *89 Seconds at Alcázar*, the 10-minute video that propelled her into the spotlight when it was unveiled at the 2004 Whitney Biennial. A lush dramatization that brings to life the royal household of Diego Velázquez's iconic 1656 painting *Las Meninas*, it can be seen through July 16 at the Museo Reina Sofía in Madrid. Sussman has finally gone to work on the long-postponed catalogue because, she explains, "we realized there's the opening of *89 Seconds* in Madrid, the seminal place for the piece."

By "we," Sussman means the Rufus Corporation, whose presence she constantly invokes. She's very eager to share the credit, especially with her key collaborators, such as choreographer Claudia de Serpa Soares, costume designer Karen Young, composer Jonathan Bepler and the actors who have been with her since the start. Yet it's also clear that Sussman's projects have but one auteur.

Take the book, whose May publication date has been pushed back. Sussman originally sought input from several designers, one of whom even returned an elegant layout that essentially »

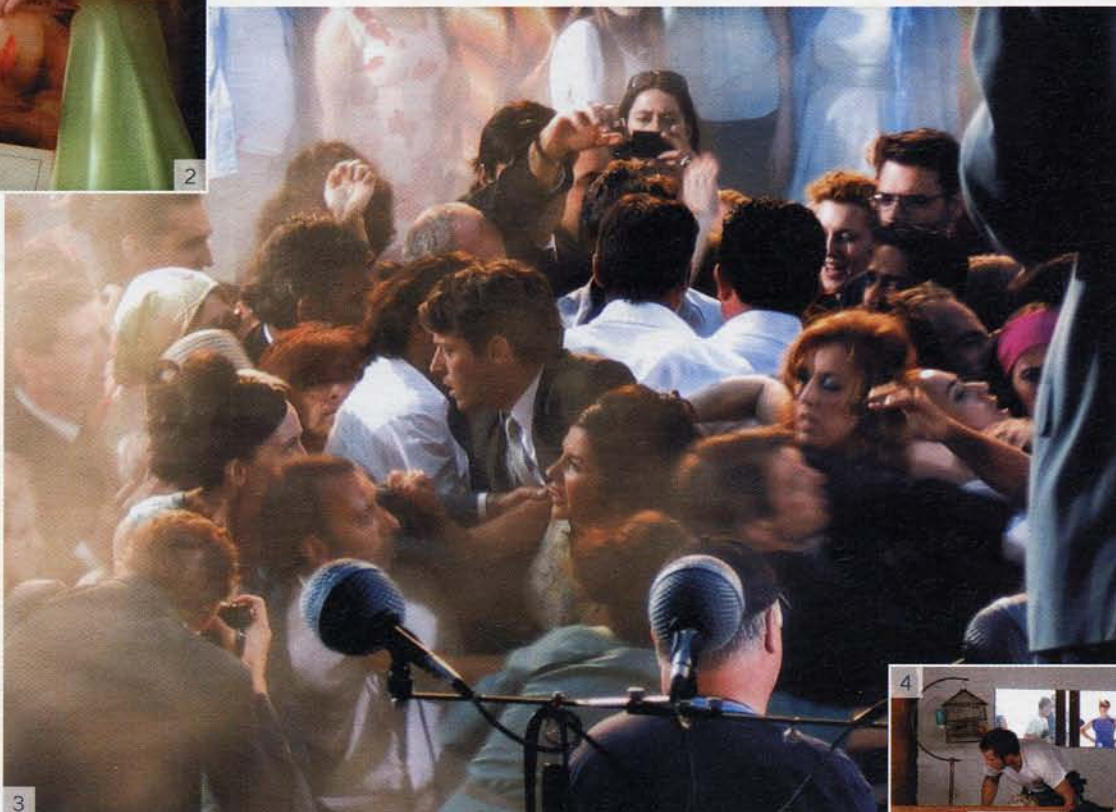


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>> SUSSMAN'S LATEST VIDEO, *THE RAPE OF THE SABINE WOMEN*, FOUND ITS GENESIS IN A PAINTING BY JACQUES-LOUIS DAVID

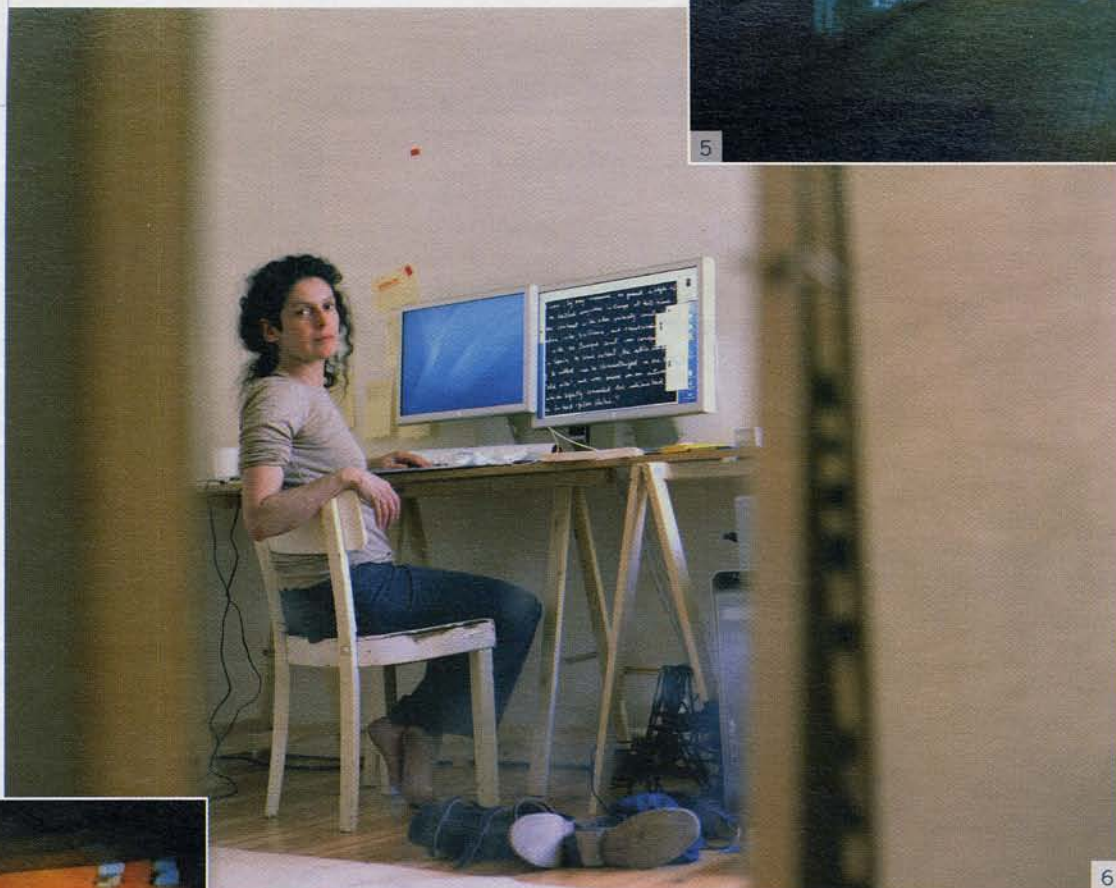


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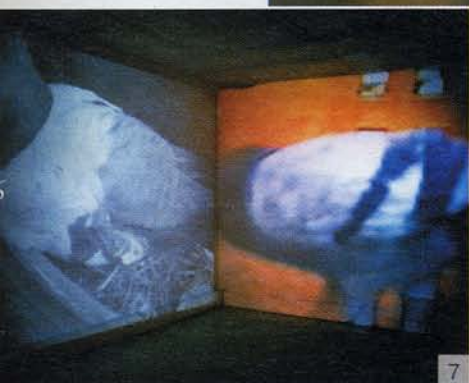


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Production stills from *The Rape of the Sabine Women*, all of which are sold as editioned photographs: (1) *Grayson Rises*; (2) *Eikonos, April 1964*; (3) *Jeff's Kennedy Moment*, at the Herodion Theater, Athens; and (4) *Marlisa on the Floor*



(5, 7) Sussman's 1997 installation *Ornithology*, in which viewers can appear with footage of pigeons projected on gallery walls; (6) the artist at her editing bay in Berlin; and (8) *Girls at the Pool*, a production still from *The Rape of the Sabine Women*



>> "I'VE BEEN ASKED MANY TIMES TO PUT *89 SECONDS* IN FILM FESTIVALS AS A SHORT FILM, AND I'VE ALWAYS REFUSED"

presented the video as a series of stills. Dissatisfied, she decided to tackle it herself, coming up with a concept that, she says, is "a combination of a high-end museum catalogue and a scrapbook" of

outtakes and other footage from the making of the video.

The book seems to relate to her video in the same way that the video relates to the Velázquez painting—by taking the viewer behind the scenes. It opens with a fuzzy black-and-white still of *Las Meninas*, culled from film footage she shot in 2000 at the Museo del Prado in Madrid, where the painting is part of the permanent collection. "It's this strange idea of stepping into the museum with a Super 8 camera and trying to steal the soul of the painting," she explains.

Next come photographs of the Williamsburg garage where she shot *89 Seconds*, filled with half-costumed actors who eventually strike a variation on the pose depicted in the famous painting. The last page shows the actors playing the Infanta and her handmaidens walking away from the camera. "It's about activating the viewpoint of the camera, so you see it's not *Las Meninas*—it's something different," Sussman says.

Shifting perspective is nothing new for the 44-year-old artist. Growing up, she lived in Turkey, Israel and India, where her father, a professor, took sabbaticals. Sussman started college in Istanbul but finished at Bennington College in Vermont, with a degree in photography. Nine weeks at Skowhegan, a summer artist residency in Maine, turned her on to installation art, which often involved video elements or some reference to film. In one of her early pieces, *River Blindness*, 1995, she effectively turned an abandoned newsstand on Roosevelt Island into a single-lens reflex camera by using mirrors on the outside to project an image of the East River onto a mirror inside the building. For *Ornithology*, 1997,



she trained 12 surveillance cameras on a group of pigeons in an airshaft and projected blown-up images of the creatures onto the gallery walls. Viewers, using a ramp and a platform that Sussman constructed, could join the pigeons and appear in the video, too.

Sussman says the turning point for her move into pure film and video came when she bought a Macintosh G3 in 1999. "It was the first time I'd owned an editing system," she says. She is shooting *Sabine Women* in digital video and film, and expects to use both formats in the final cut. "If you're in a bunch of fighting people, you can walk in with a Super 8 camera in a way you can't with a \$150,000 high-definition camera," she says. Still, she adds, "my cinematographer wants to kill me."

As with *89 Seconds*, *Sabine Women* found its genesis in a painting. This time it's the 1799 *Intervention of the Sabine Women* by Jacques-Louis David, which depicts women and children >>

stepping in to separate two warring armies—the climactic moment of the myth associated with the founding of Rome. But “the ancient meaning of rape is not the same as the modern meaning of rape,” Sussman points out. “The ancient meaning is from the Latin *rapare*, which means ‘to be carried away.’” That notion seems to suit Sussman herself: Ask her a simple question and she tends to launch into a long, conversational riff.

Likewise, she and her collaborators used the myth and the David painting as a starting point for the new piece but, through improvisational sessions, allowed themselves to get carried away. Now the action takes place in Athens and Berlin instead of ancient Rome, and the time appears to be the early 1960s. The wordless drama that unfolds does not trace the birth of a society, but depicts the destruction of a utopia whose modernist trappings—in particular, the ‘60s-era costumes—are stripped away in a battle scene at the Parthenon.

Sussman not only directs and produces, she also acts (appearing briefly in *Sabine Women* as a photojournalist), and obsesses over the editing process—often until the moment the gallery doors open. Although her videos, with their lavish costumes, sets, locations and production budgets, could easily be considered art films, as opposed to video or film installations, she adamantly rejects that notion. “I’ve been asked numerous times to put *89 Seconds* in film festivals as a short film,” she says. “I’ve always refused, because a film has a beginning, a middle and an end, and *89 Seconds* is a seamless loop. That completely defies all the things that films do.”

Sussman does allow that *Sabine Women*, which has a dramatic structure—and a 100-minute projected running time—might well be classified as a film, but she’s still not convinced that it warrants a

theatrical screening. “I don’t believe in torturing people, that they should sit through hours of stuff that’s so nonnarrative,” she says. “It’s very different to put something in a gallery where people feel free to wander in and out as they want.”

Sabine Women, like *89 Seconds*, is being produced in an edition of 10 with 2 artists’ proofs. Several copies have been presold to help cover Sussman’s production budget, which is likely to come in at around \$1 million after postproduction, according to Christian Viveros-Fauné, co-founder of the artist’s primary gallery, Roebing Hall in New York. No price has yet been set for the finished work, he says, but it will probably exceed \$200,000.

The gallery is also offering editioned photographs that were taken on set, as well as several “flat-screen works.” These consist of a few seconds of slowed-down footage that is installed and sold on a flat-screen Mac mini. (Prices range from \$10,000 to \$15,000 for a photograph in an edition of 10 to \$20,000 for a flat-screen work in an edition of 6.)

Although Sussman says, “Nobody knows about my résumé before *89 Seconds*,” she doesn’t feel the work she is making now is all that different. “I’m still doing a cinema vérité thing,” she says, “except I’m doing it with actors now, instead of whoever wanders in front of the camera.” 田



>> “THERE’S THIS STRANGE IDEA OF ENTERING THE MUSEUM AND TRYING TO STEAL THE SOUL OF THE PAINTING”



From *89 Seconds* at Alcázar: (9) *Light on Her Neck*, a video still; (10) *King Sleeps*, a production still; (11) *Infanta Enters*, a video still; and (12) *Set with Red Curtain*, a production still

