



# Changing platforms

Video art used to be all po-faced protest against the mass media. Now, with large-scale theatrical productions, it seems more intent on rivalling Hollywood, says **Nick Stillman**



Eve Sussman & the Rufus Corporation, *Women in the S-Bahn*, production still from *The Rape of the Sabine Women*, 2005

In what must be one of the most gloriously boring pieces in the history of American video art, John Baldessari repeatedly motions, ever so slightly, oh so awkwardly, with his arms and legs, shoulders and torso, concluding each underwhelming gesture with the dubious assertion: 'I am making art.' Baldessari's 1971 video *I am Making Art*, seemingly a spoof of artists' indulgent self-seriousness, also epitomises the low-tech approach and almost confrontationally unspectacular content of this then-embryonic medium.

The early practitioners of American video art were responding, writes Martha Rosler in her essay *Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment*, to the 'silencing or muting of artists as producers of living culture in the face of the vast mass-media industries'. Hence their co-option of a format whose control rested comfortably in the hands of the greatest mass-media industry of them all: television.

Early video art not only posed an affront to the passivity demanded of viewers by television; it was also practical. The medium got its point across without lavish budgets and didn't require specialised technical or alchemical knowledge. It is important to remember that American performance art was inextricably linked to video. Its figures were often the same, and many performance artists used the technology to create records of spontaneous actions.

In general, narrative plots and fictional characters were unwelcome in early American video art; instead, artists focused the lens on themselves as performers of banality. While television seduced through dramatics, most early video and performance artists (with the glaring exception of Chris Burden) eschewed drama. Clearly this lack of theatrics was a conscious protest at the mass media, but also any such theatrics would have simply been counterproductive to the sober quest for self-awareness engaged in by such artists such as Vito Acconci and Bruce Nauman.

Any art medium, of course, morphs over time, as does its intentions. In New York, the inaugural Performa05, curated by RoseLee Goldberg, and Marina Abramovic's week-long series of performances *Seven Easy Pieces*, at the Guggenheim this winter, were greeted with triumphal cries that performance art was 'back'. Yet much of Performa's 'performance' felt weirdly unspontaneous – slick even, like scripted spectacles. (The exception was filmmaker Mary Jordan's terrifically drunken *Dead Jack Theater* happening, a truly Sixties-style tribute to underground artist Jack Smith.)

Likewise, video art in America has progressed to the point in its historical arc where its high production values nearly rival those of Hollywood. What, then, is motivating contemporary artists to create such cinematic productions? And what are the implications of confining performance art to scripted theatrics?

Eve Sussman and the Rufus Corporation's work-in-progress *The Rape of the Sabine Women* is an appropriate place to ▶



*Ambitious cinematic-theatrical productions have been conspicuous in New York's gallery landscape all winter*

◀ open a discussion about artists fashioning *gesamtkunstwerks* for the screen. The piece, which uses an Old Master painting as its point of departure, was made in intimate collaboration with the Rufus Corporation. This band of actors, crew members and artists initially came together for the making of Sussman's 2004 video *89 Seconds at Alcázar*, a re-creation of the moments before and during Velasquez's completion of *Las Meninas*.

A crossbreed of musical, performance art and cinema, *The Rape of the Sabine Women* is loosely based on Jacques-Louis David's 1799 painting *The Intervention of the Sabine Women*. According to myth, early Roman citizens abducted a group of Sabine women in the midst of a festival. But by the time the Sabine men came to retrieve their women and wage war on the scandalous Romans, the stolen women had reconciled with their abductors and they launched themselves into the chaotic cloud of battling men. Sussman's re-creation departs liberally from both the legend and David's painting, most obviously in its historical setting. After much research into Greek modernism the company landed on the concept of updating the myth to the

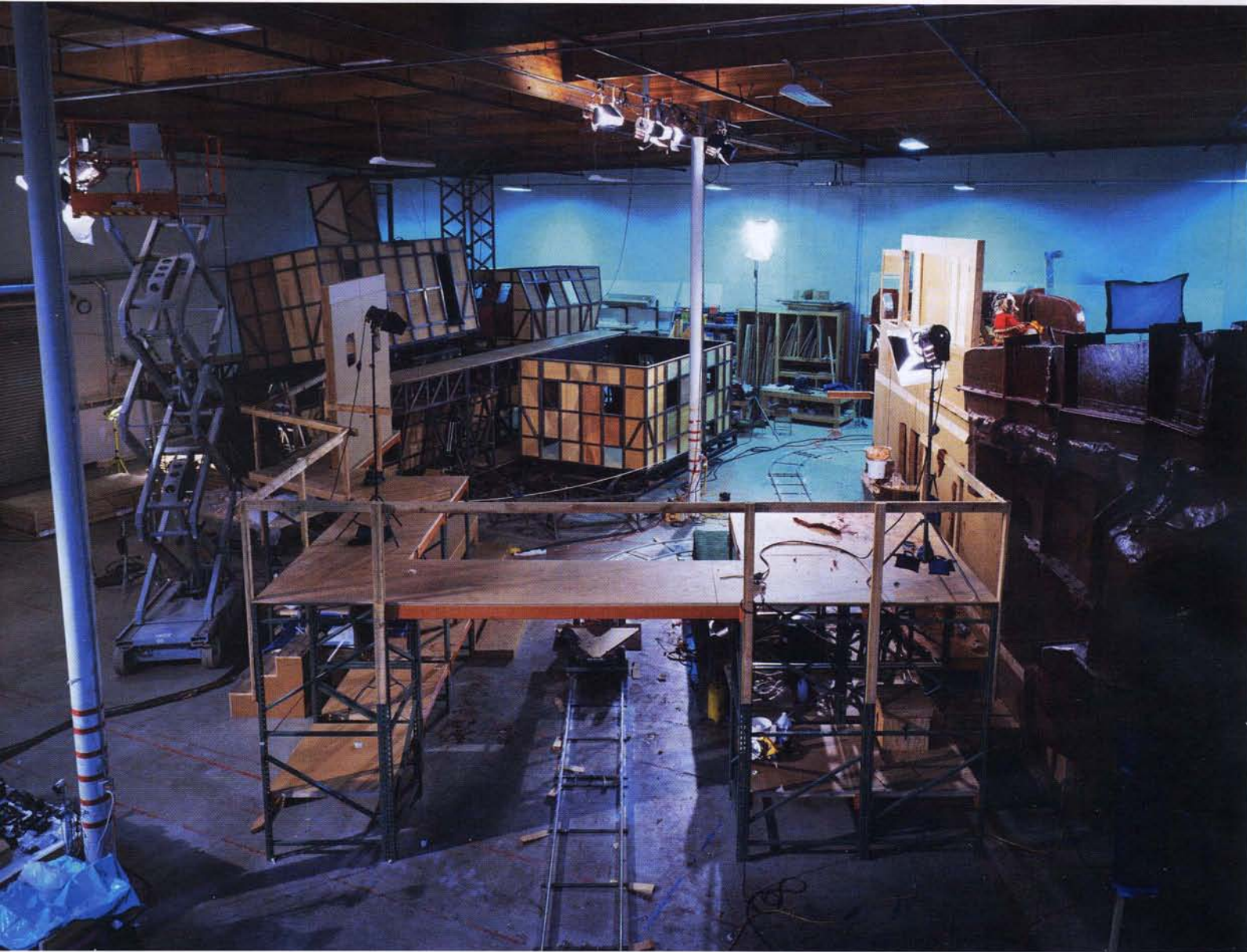
1960s and gained permission to film at the landmark Valsamakis house in Anavyssos, with its perfectly preserved 1961 decor.

Sussman and the Rufus Corporation are in the process of paring down and piecing together 140 hours of footage – much of it improvised – into a film that Sussman says will be 'as long or short as it has to be'. The action frequently looks like highly stylised theatre exercises, with the characters in period dress. In one long take, which Sussman showed me, solitary men, dressed in the bleak blacks and whites of CIA agents, roam Berlin's Tempelhof Airport. Although they read papers, check their watches and cross their legs in unison, they're seemingly oblivious of each other.

In the scene that is likely to be the film's eventual climax, men cluster on the floor of an outdoor theatre while a band play muddy live skronk directly into Pro Tools. Panic sinks in slowly, chaos comes to reign. The crowd undulates gently at first, not talking but grunting and struggling to maintain its balance while the musicians play on, undeterred. When the women enter the fray, the visual opulence of their bright dresses seems to trigger the onslaught of anarchy that follows. Clothes, dignity and inhibition are all shed in an epic battle that Sussman and choreographer Claudia De Serpa Soares sought to lace with the drama of 'moving paintings'.

The scene was shot in three locations, including the Roman amphitheatre at the Acropolis. The music is reminiscent of bands such as Flipper and Swans, and the band, led by composer

Above: Eve Sussman & the Rufus Corporation, *Marilisa on the Floor*, production still from *The Rape of the Sabine Women*, 2005



Jonathan Bepler, includes the former Swans bassist Algis Kizys. *The Rape of the Sabine Women* probably won't be shown until the spring, but ambitious cinematic-theatrical productions by American artists have been conspicuous in New York's gallery landscape all winter.

Catherine Sullivan's six-channel video *The Chittendens* dazzles with high-tech effects: it employs frequent use of montage, theatrical spotlighting and a roving camera. *The Chittendens* also has elements in common with Sussman's work-in-progress, such as its constant negotiation of the dialectic of improvisation versus scripted performance.

Sullivan uses a group of actors to enact specific 'attitudes', viscerally played out in vignettes that introduce seemingly every human emotion in the space of a few minutes. Twisting, contorting and cajoling like malfunctioning wind-up toys, the actors seem strangely mechanical and their spontaneity feels canned, straight out of Chaplin. There's an element of tragedy pervading *The Chittendens*; as they attempt to dramatise such a wide range of emotions in so short a time, the actors seem trapped by the screen's enduring ability to transform individuals into stock characters.

The characters in Laurie Anderson's recent cinematic offering, *4.17.05: The Fox*, on view in September and October at Sean Kelly Gallery, derive from dreams and thus aren't cursed with the self-consciousness that plagues a character who knows she is being watched. Anderson's 12-minute mini-film is the product of her own fitful sleep and haunting dreams



while away from home. In *The Fox* Anderson uncannily appears in her own dream, calmly watching the rather dull proceedings: her brother solemnly snapping photos and a fox (actually a dog?) nuzzling the limp body of a corpse, which seems to be concealing the animal's dinner.

Watching these recent works by Anderson, Sullivan and Sussman can feel like watching extraordinarily aesthetic recorded theatre. This quality is epitomised by Matthew Barney's now-completed *Cremaster* cycle and last year's *Drawing Restraint 9*. Of all the artists mentioned so far, ▶

Top: Paul McCarthy, *Caribbean Pirates* (Captain Morgan), 2001-2005, general view of set Below: Paul McCarthy, *Caribbean Pirates, Pirate Party*, 2005, performance photograph

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◀ Barney revels most in abjection and grotesquerie – themes that have characterised Paul McCarthy’s practice since its inception and were very much in evidence in his *Caribbean Pirates* production, on show this winter at the Whitechapel Gallery, London.

As much as Sussman, Sullivan, Anderson and Barney imbue their productions with beauty, McCarthy eschews it; or rather, his beauty exists in gore, guts and naked flesh obscured by “blood”. For the filmed *Caribbean Pirates* McCarthy enlisted a team of 30-plus ‘buccaneers and wenches’ who tortured their own bodies and each other’s in a sadistic excavation of brutality, grotesque ambition and repressed guilt: his pirate-colonisers’ psychic baggage. The ramshackle warehouse set later served as the off-site installation *Pirate Project*.

If McCarthy’s production was ecstatically presented in the language of amateur theater, that goes double for Mike Kelley’s recent filmic installation, *Day is Done*, which showed in November and December at Gagosian Gallery, New York. Slapstick comedy, jokes in questionable taste and a general B-movie feel reign in Kelley’s bathetic triumph, composed of 32 individual mini-movies with accompanying installations and photographs. Kelley, like the aforementioned artists, uses ritualistic behaviour as his starting point: American high-school students’ stereotype-drenched after-school activities. The filmed vignettes, all imagined re-creations of actual plays and other pathetic productions gleaned from old yearbooks,

turn off and on during the show. It would take about three hours – the length of an epic film – to watch them all.

The filmmaker John Waters, in a recent interview with Kelley, introduced a question by saying, ‘I know that a lot of artists today want to make movies...’ His point seems to be that ambitious American video artists are no longer content for a piece to run on a loop in a gallery. Bill Viola, for instance, recently premiered a suite of videos as part of a collaboration with Esa-Pekka Salonen, director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and film director Peter Sellars, which staged Wagner’s opera *Tristan und Isolde* as a ‘multi-arts experience’.

Works on such a grandiose scale seem to gesture towards a once-and-for-all dissolution of the modernist tenet of medium-specificity, by merging performance art, theatre, music and choreography, often with the artist handling many or all of these creative roles. It could be said that the most hyped works of contemporary American video art epitomise modernism’s breakdown and postmodernism’s quest for interdisciplinarity – a contemporary *gesamtkunstwerk*.

*Eve Sussman and the Rufus Corporation’s The Rape of the Sabine Women will show at co-producing venues Nasber Museum of Art, North Carolina, and the Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, later this year. rufuscorporation.com, nasber.duke.edu, hamburgerbahnhof.de, roebblingball.com*

**Opposite:** Catherine Sullivan, *The Chittendens*, 2005, six-channel projection, 16mm film transferred to video (colour, black and white), musical score composed by Sean Griffin **Above:** Mike Kelley, *Day is Done*, 2005, installation view at Gagosian Gallery, New York