

on set with Eve Sussman  
and the Rufus Corporation  
Amanda Coulson

# spontaneous combustion



BOTH ARTISTICALLY AND LITERALLY, Eve Sussman and her company, the Rufus Corporation, are hard to pin down. 'Unstructured', 'ad hoc' and 'organic' are words that continually crop up as Sussman tries to describe their working process. And, although she has a studio in Brooklyn, the coordination of a meeting and interview required emails between Frankfurt, New York and Africa, calls to France and a trip to Berlin; everybody seemed to be somewhere else, yet they flawlessly materialized when necessary.

This sense of constant motion in a unit that dissolves and reforms seems to be the force that drives this itinerant group of artists, actors, musicians and dancers, which first came together to create the astounding ten-minute video piece *89 Seconds at Alcázar*, which took the last Whitney Biennial by storm. Based on the Velázquez painting *Las Meñinas* (1656), the work reflects the company's perpetual state of flux, capturing the intriguing dance of a group of people at their leisure (though

from different classes and bound by strict protocols): they come together, separate, form smaller groups and relationships that themselves change and transform. Their smallest actions communicate snippets of information that imply a non-existent narrative. Though nothing ever actually happens, the viewer is immediately drawn into an intimate world of detail and gesture, where every movement suggests drama.

When I first met Sussman she was installing work at an art fair – dusty and drill-in-hand – while, two feet away, her dealer talked about her to some collectors as though she wasn't there. However, far from finding this awkward, she confessed that she quite enjoyed being incognito and 'able to spy on the public a little bit'. Indeed, she admits that if she 'could put together groups of people all the time and just watch them, it would be eternally interesting to me'.

Like *89 Seconds*, the Rufus Corporation's current project is inspired by an Old Master painting, in this case Jacques-Louis David's *The Intervention of the Sabine Women*

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 'Grayson Rises', Grayson Millwood and Rosa Prodrômou in a production still from *The Rape of the Sabine Women*

PHOTO: BOBBY NEEL ADAMS  
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Below  
 Jacques-Louis David  
*The Intervention of the Sabine Women*, 1799, oil on canvas, 385 x 522 cm  
 MUSÉE DU LOUVRE, PARIS  
 PHOTO: © PHOTO RMN AND RENÉ-GABRIEL OJÉDA



(1799), which illustrates the moment when, three years after the abduction and rape of their women by the Romans, the Sabine men finally mounted a counterattack to reclaim them. By now, though, the women have assimilated – become wives and mothers – and throw themselves into the fray to prevent their old and new families from massacring each other. The new production is much more ambitious than its predecessor (partly thanks to funding from the Hauptstadtkulturfonds-Berlin, the J.F. Costopoulos Foundation in Athens, and the New York State Council on the Arts), with large-scale crowd and fight scenes, indoor and outdoor locations in Berlin and Greece, plus a wolf thrown in for good measure.

While *Las Meñinas* and *The Intervention of the Sabine Women* appear to provide entirely different models – one a moment of respite, the other a surging force of violent activity – the company is approaching its latest production from a similar psychological standpoint to the first. Despite being titled *The Rape of the Sabine Women* the

video's unfolding story is more concerned with the sociological and emotional consequences of abduction and seduction than with the physical, mythological rape.

One of the actors, Jeff Wood, describes the dynamic as 'an epic love triangle between three groups of people' and, while the piece does eventually develop into a heroic and dishevelled fight scene, much time and concentration is focused upon the psychological state of these people prior to the battle – the tensions between the women and men, the relationships between groups and sub-groups – all of which contributes to the drama of the final mêlée.

Adding to the impression that David's masterpiece is more a jumping-off point

**'we did a four-day rehearsal and an almost non-stop, four-day shoot until you didn't know the separation between your character and your personality'**

'Disintegration at Hydra', production still from *The Rape of the Sabine Women*  
PHOTO: RICOH GERBL  
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than a model, Sussman's video work will not mimic the painting that inspired it in either costume or setting. Instead, the action is set during the 1960s, a decision that, like most things with the Rufus Corporation, was a mixture of happenstance and lateral thinking. Scouting for locations in Greece, it turned out that the local production manager, Jiannis Savvidis, was a huge fan of 60s architecture and showed the group some beautifully preserved sites. This, in turn, led them to consider the timelessness of the themes they were tackling.

'We realized that the 60s was a period we could relate to because the images from that time are completely resonant as photographic moments,' Sussman recalls. 'And I'm fascinated by how you make the history of those moments come alive. *Las Meniñas* originally interested me not as a baroque moment but as a photographic moment. There is a psychological complexity in photography that is rarely there in painting because you capture mood in a really different way.'

While a dramaturge, Ricoh Gerbl (also one of the project's photographers), was brought on board to flush out a plot, the narrative develops as much from improvisational work and an emotional reverberation as from planning or blocking. As Gerbl remarks, 'While I looked a little into the history, I was more interested in how you can chase the subject out of the painting and the actors through questions, how to narrow the story down to a main thought, how an emotional situation can bring the story to its climax.'

One of the key locations for the new production is the perfectly preserved 1961 Valsamakis House, built on a cliff overlooking the Aegean an hour outside of Athens. In order to produce the highly charged psychological intensity that drives the story, Sussman literally holed the company up for days on end, shooting for 14 hours a day in 40- and 50-minute takes, made possible by the company's use of high-definition video. 'In the psychological sense,' says Sussman, 'this piece is totally about the desire borne

*Below*  
'The Wolf in Templehof',  
production still  
from *The Rape of  
the Sabine Women*  
PHOTO: BENEDIKT PARTENHEIMER  
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*Facing page*  
'Girls at the Pool'  
production still  
from *The Rape of  
the Sabine Women*  
PHOTO: BENEDIKT PARTENHEIMER  
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of loneliness and consumption. Taking the image of a bunch of perfectly coiffed 1960s women and their power-broker men hanging out sipping Martinis in the opulence of the Valsamakis house, in which nothing but unrequited longing is witnessed, and calling this *The Rape of the Sabine Women* is perfect poetic justice to the era and its underlying social structure.' From an actor's point of view, Woods found the Valsamakis stage of the production the most consuming: 'We did a four-day rehearsal and an almost non-stop, four-day shoot until you didn't know the separation between your character and your personality. It felt authentic because it was.'

Other key stage-setting moments were shot at locations as diverse as Berlin's Tempelhof Airport and Pergamon Museum, the latter acting as a place of transition, connecting ancient and present times, a place where the men are confronted with their past. Later on, during the shooting in Greece, a day was spent in the Athens butchers' market where choral work – conceived and led by composer Jonathan Bepler – was improvised along to ambient clanging sounds of knives hacking flesh and offal being thrown into metal basins; the serendipitous arrival of a local band led to a wild, unscripted dance sequence, spontaneously begun by supporting actor Eva Dimou and performed in the middle of this riotous and bloody environment.

The massive finale – the culminating battle – was staged in three locations: the ancient amphitheatre of the Herodion, the smaller Theatro Petras and finally on a football field on the island of Hydra, where cast, crew and equipment had to be brought in by donkey or on foot. By this point, however, states Wood, 'We were far away from the original artwork and were just as influenced by period issues of *Life* magazine and found photographs.' Choreographer Claudia De Serpa Soares concurs, 'While we did connect to the statues of the Pergamon Altar, it was more coincidental that we could match our images up to old-master pictures. I was mostly interested in the different layers and volumes of bodies – that's what fascinated me, to work with that many bodies – but when I saw the final pictures I was amazed by what we managed to get. There were also lots of moments [in the painting] we had wanted to capture – I was particularly struck by an image of the woman holding her baby up in the air – but never got.'

Photographer Benedikt Partenheimer also maintains that he worked without attempting to recreate anything in particular, describing the process as 'very spontaneous, where you react to a certain location. It's like stepping into these different worlds and you try to capture the atmosphere of that space. Of course, you do some research to understand the original piece but in the end you react to what is there at that moment, at that time, to the actors and the atmosphere. In

the end it got to the point where you couldn't distinguish between what was real and what was staged.'

Indeed, in staging the culminating fight scene, the extras – who were actually singers since the scene starts out as a massive choral work conducted by Bepler – had no idea what they were about to witness. Consequently, when the main cast erupted into violence, some of the audience was truly shocked while others descended the theatre steps and joined in the fray. All of this was captured on film, as were some members of the crew, who often appear in the sidelines. As Berlin-based production manager Wassili Zygouris explained, 'There was definitely a conscious connection to the cinema *verité* movement, which was a very clear decision we made at the project's beginning, that we wanted to have the process be a part of the storytelling.'

The final images actually contain references to three periods: Greek antiquity, the twentieth century and the present.

Nonetheless, in a sort of perfect cyclical concurrence, the pieces take on a timelessness that endows the images with a classical tone, a tone not achieved by costumes or flawless period replication, but rather one of atmosphere and attitude. The Greco-Roman classical era – just as the Neo-classical period to which David belonged – was enthralled by the concept of an idealistic surface perfection, a perfection also promoted in the glossy advertising images of the period Sussman and her colleagues reproduce. Just as modern-day dress does not contradict the meaning of classical theatre, but rather often underscores the very accessibility of the subject matter, similarly the Rufus Corporation have successfully moved beyond merely aesthetic costume drama to mine the universality of the human condition, creating work that is convincing, compelling and, indeed, classic. ●

*The Rape of the Sabine Women* will premiere in spring 2006 at the Hamburger Bahnhof-Berlin



**'in the psychological sense, this piece is about the desire borne of loneliness and consumption'**