
GUERNICA

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White on Noir



Suzanne Snider interviews Eve Sussman

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The artist Eve Sussman dissects infrastructure as beauty, Soviet-era aesthetics, Occupy Wall Street, Williamsburg lofts, and her latest film that uses an algorithm to distinguish each screening. With a sample selection.



Photograph via Flickr by Cea

Whiteonwhite:algorithmicnoir is a dystopian art film using live editing to ensure that no two audiences see the same film. On a perfect fall day, I meet the film's creator, Eve Sussman, and her husband, artist Simon Lee. Sussman and Lee are

relaxing with a morning coffee at a small café in South Williamsburg, Brooklyn, among friends and neighbors, including Misha Libman, a Russian economist who lives in their building and served as a collaborator on *whiteonwhite*. Sussman is a consummate conversationalist—preternaturally friendly in a way that I know me of the neighborhood fifteen years ago (she has been here for more than a decade). On our route to her place, we discuss the now-infamous 2008 housing battle between her building’s residents and the city. Citing the landlord’s covert matzo-making operation in the building’s basement as a fire hazard, the city evicted roughly 200 residents, mostly artists, who were faced with temporary homelessness and few answers as to whether they could return. Many saw it as a ruse to clear the way for luxury condos. (Ultimately, loft laws prevailed.)

Sussman and Lee’s loft is a raw space with graceful touches. A row of tomato plants in planters—now covered with sun—is flush with a wall-sized window that overlooks the water. Behind me, in the other half of the loft, are remnants of the *whiteonwhite* installation, recently struck from Cristin Tierney’s new space in New York—including the theater seats that comprised the constructed “blackbox” theater within the gallery. Lofted above a cement factory and other industrial schemes, the apartment affords a shockingly beautiful view. Sussman is experimenting with the tomatoes, and she speaks about them with the same attention and curiosity with which she speaks about all of her work. Sitting at a table near the growing plants, we discussed her new film, as well as utopian ideas, water wars, the banking industry and the apocalypse. As it turns out, the tomatoes are not unrelated to these topics.

The plot of *whiteonwhite:algorithmicnoir* centers on a geophysicist code-writer named Holz and a corrupt company that attempts to lull workers into a cooperative stupor by spiking the water with lithium. The film takes (at least half) its name from a painting by Kazimir Malevich, also titled “White on White.” The second half of the film’s title refers to the live editing that occurs with each screening of the film. Sussman worked with programmer Jeff Garneau to ensure that no two screenings are alike. To achieve this, audio and visual clips collected by Sussman were tagged with approximately 150 key words, ranging from color (“blue”) to emotional qualities (“anxiety”). When the computer selects a word, as directed by Garneau’s algorithm, the audio and visual clips tagged with that word are brought together. Sussman calls

the programmed Mac tower the “Serendipity Machine.”

Though this film is Sussman’s most ambitious project to date, it is her third film, and *whiteonwhite* concludes the trilogy. Her first, *89 Seconds at Alcázar*, Diego Velásquez’s painting, “Las Meninas,” was a breakout sensation Whitney Biennial, prompting many critics to cast Sussman, incorrectly, “overnight sensation.” In fact, Sussman was exhibiting sculpture and surveillance video from 1991 to 2003, including well-received shows at the now-defunct Bronwyn Keenan Gallery in 1997 and 1999. Between her first film, *89 Seconds*, and her third [*whiteonwhite*], Sussman made *The Rape of the Sabine Women*, named after Jacques-Louis David’s *Intervention of the Sabine Women*.

For both *Sabine Women* and *whiteonwhite*, as well as *89 Seconds*, Sussman engaged an eclectic and revolving pick-up company of collaborators she calls the Rufus Corporation, which expands and contracts in size, as needed. In the case of *whiteonwhite*, the itinerant project engaged more than fifty people across five countries, not counting the factory workers and watchmaker, who were drawn into the shoots, *in situ*. If you include the crew’s arrest at the site of the Baikonur Cosmodrome, in Russia, the film also engaged a few prison guards.

Sussman, who has experience in construction and as a contractor, has an air of can-do, ready to roll up her sleeves—with Pre-Raphaelite hair and comfortable work clothes. As she speaks, it’s easy to see why she inspires confidence and loyalty from repeat collaborators—and collaboration is something she continually seeks. At the end of our afternoon together, in fact, Sussman offers to help me with a project in Russia and asks whether I might be interested in her bank project.

As Sussman brainstorms about her next project, *whiteonwhite* is just returning from Sundance. It heads next to SITE Santa Fe and the Berlinale in February, and then on to SFMOMA in the spring.

—Suzanne Snider for Guernica

Guernica: Where was *whiteonwhite* filmed?

Eve Sussman: I used to be cagey about this. I said, “We’re not telling people. We were in City-A.” The main location is a tiny two-bit town on the edge of the Caspian in Kazakhstan called Aktau—which nobody except people in the oil business or those who work for Halliburton have been to. The only reason a traveler would go there is to go the Mangystau Desert, which is this impressive piece of desert where you can go on pilgrimages out to these Sufi sites. This is how we ended up there, but the town is a post-apocalyptic industrial hellhole. When you first get there you think, “This is the ugliest place I’ve ever seen. There’s nothing attractive about it, there’s nothing inviting, let’s just leave.” After two hours, you realize that every place you’re going is numbered, as if you’re inside the guts of a circuit board or you’re living in a combination lock. The two people I was traveling with would send me a text, “Oh we’re in Region 8” or “Come meet us at 8174.” After the first three or four hours we started looking around and saying “Oh my god, we’re in an *Alphaville* set,” or a set for some sci-fi film noir that could have been made in the 1960s. But people still live here and it’s actually a boomtown again because up north, there’s all this new oil that’s been discovered.

Guernica: That reminds me of North Dakota, here in the U.S., where some fairly desolate towns are rapidly changing because someone hit oil.

Eve Sussman: We also went to these places where there is new futuristic stuff out of *The Jetsons* or *Star Trek*, built predominantly by Norman Foster—like the big ball building you see in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan. We went to Astana. We went to Dubai. Talk about hellish: Dubai is horrifying and completely unsustainable and completely illogical and built with no regard for anything that has to do with continuing the planet. We were there for four or five days. We were also in Azerbaijan, and in Baku which is really interesting. We went back four times to Aktau, which was built in the 1960s as a closed town. If you weren’t living there or working there you couldn’t go there in the 1960s and ’70s.

Guernica: And after?

Eve Sussman: First, it was a uranium mining town that was closed to the public. Then they sort of tried to sell it as a resort town because it was on the Caspian,

although the Caspian is this icky, brackish body of water, which is not inviting at all. Then *perestroika* happened, which was economically horrifying for everyone in the Soviet Union, and Kazakhstan was the last to leave. I think it was in 1991 that they became their own independent state. Now it's all about trying to reinvent history and reinvent themselves. ▲

They've built these buildings that are about showing off that new social and political power. But what is interesting is unlike places like Dubai where it's all about private hotels, luxury hotels and luxury condos and high-rises and private space, the Russians built all the housing so everybody owns an apartment. In 1991 whatever apartment you lived in became your apartment. So when they started to build all this new stuff that had to show off the nouveau riche oil well and the power of the state, they built civic spaces. They built plazas and monuments and restaurants that circle around in the sky and now, the latest crazy Norman Foster thing: a 500-meter diameter or a 150-meter high tent that's going to make summer in the winter in Astana because it gets to negative 20 below.

Guernica: That's kind of utopian.

Eve Sussman: Yes, there are bits of that. You have these public plazas and these places for people to hang out. But it is also all about the power of the dictator, too. You go into the Bayterek Monument and it's just a big glass ball that you go up to in an elevator for the view and a restaurant. But the main thing there is a gold cast of a hand print of Nazarbayev that you can put your hand in—in his gold handprint.

Guernica: How do you track your curiosity and follow it when you're negotiating it with other members of the Rufus Corporation?

Eve Sussman: We were all pretty much attracted to the same things. The last trip we went as a crew of ten and we took the train across the country, seventy-two hours from the Caspian across Kazakhstan, basically to the edge of the Chinese border.

Guernica: The Trans-Siberian Railway?

Eve Sussman: [That's] further north. It's actually the Almaty-Moscow train, a week-long train ride. We did almost four days of it. It takes you right across Kazakhstan from the west to the east. We were just five people on that train, then, and we took two train cabins so we could have one as the studio car and the other as the eating and sleeping car, and the Kazakh people thought we were completely  extravagant to have two train cabins. But we had a lot of gear with us and I thought there was no way we could keep track of our gear and have food and sleep.

To scramble footage in a time line manually is just ridiculous. There's got to be a way to do this more efficiently. I wanted an algorithm.

Guernica: How did you engage specific locals to participate in the film? I'm thinking of one scene with the watchmaker...

Eve Sussman: Right, I loved him. He was so cute. We had with us the lovely Misha Libman, whom you just met, who happens to live next door to me [in Williamsburg]. We found the watchmaker on the last trip and we had with us Misha and a couple of other folks who were acting as our fixers and translators. We'd just walk around and see an interesting watch shop inside of a little shopping mall type place, and we'd say, "Misha, go talk to that guy!" We had a couple of charming fixers who could talk anybody into anything. The last time we went to Aktau, we made friends with a guy who ran the one video production company in town. He was right out of central casting. He was six-foot-four, rode this huge Harley-Davidson motorcycle, was a singer in a rock band in the local expat bar and was super cool, all dressed in leather. He had cornered the market on making videos for the oil business for companies there. He also made some touristic landscape videos. He had a real studio with real equipment, big HD camera, good editing stuff, real tripods, a bit of a crew. We hired him—Vlad—to be our fixer; he knew everyone. And you must have seen the shots of the crazy old Russian factory where Holz is supposedly working. That was a functioning chemical factory. Everyone there was a worker except for our main actor, Jeff, and one other young woman.

Guernica: What was said to the watchmaker and the workers in the factory?

Eve Sussman: To the watchmaker, we just said, “We’re making a film. We’re from America, we think your watch shop is really beautiful. Will you do a film with us?” We paid him something and he was excited. You really didn’t need anything. I think we hung one upside-down clock or something. We did very little art direction. He had all the tools and the huge monocle.

Guernica: He was a natural.

Eve Sussman: A lot of the people we filmed, like the workers in that Russian chemical factory, were going about their business. The workers were keeping these big vats of boiling chemicals from blowing up, so they were running that factory as we were filming.

Guernica: Can you tell me about the Serendipity Machine?

Eve Sussman: Originally, we created the Serendipity Machine to generate more ideas than we could ever generate ourselves. In the past, when I took a bunch of clips and threw them into a timeline and went *chop, chop, chop*, some of those little serendipitous positions were really exciting. To scramble footage in a time line manually is just ridiculous. There’s got to be a way to do this more efficiently. I wanted an algorithm.

Guernica: So the Serendipity Machine was a means to an end, at first?

Eve Sussman: I didn’t know. Thinking about the hierarchy of the editor in the history of American filmmaking, the editor is really put on this pedestal. People talk about Walter Murch and these famous Hollywood editors as almost the next important thing after the director, maybe the DP. It’s different in Europe where the editor isn’t quite so elevated. The editor is a really important role. But I started to realize that so much of what I liked about the edits that I have made happened because of luck. Because I dropped “A” next to “C” and it was cool, and then I put “X” there... especially if you’re interested in a more poetic kind of filmmaking that isn’t

about just reading from a script and picking the best take, which is how a lot of mainstream movies are edited.

So we thought you could write a program to do that. You still have to make cuts. We dump three thousand clips in the machine, and those clips still have to be cut by a person. At first, it was just randomization like an iPod shuffle or something. Then I thought, “Wait, what if it could really fit with what’s being said on the screen?” So if you were talking about a snow globe, there’d be a shot of someone walking through the snow. If you were talking about a kid who prayed five times a day you might see a shot of the birds or a shot of the clouds.

The voiceovers have tags within their time code and so when it hits a tag it’s going to look for “anxiety” or “birds” or “landscape” or “problem”—whatever the tag is. Within those three thousand clips in the hard drive, it’s going to find however many clips share that tag and pick one. The machine bases the choice on these meta-data tags, keywords, in the course of this implied narrative. I’m not satisfied with everything about the piece. But what I am satisfied with is that it’s a lot like how we make choices in our life. You don’t get to make a lot of those choices; they just happen.

Guernica: When I watched the film, I felt like I was growing or getting smarter. There’s a little bit of ego to watching, in the sense of it becoming a full piece. But then there was also this idea that the film was going to go on without me. It started without me; it’s going to end without me. It didn’t care about me in that way.

Eve Sussman: I love everything you just said. When we first started showing work-in-progress versions of *whiteonwhite*, we’d do Q&As where the audience would say, “Well, I want to take part too. I want to be able to type in the tag ‘birds’ and see all the clips with birds. I want it to be interactive.” And we’d be like, “Well actually, it is interactive. You are already adapting—you just aren’t being able to touch the buttons on the machine. But you are interacting in a much bigger way than you realize.” That’s what you were just pointing to with what you’re saying.

Guernica: When I was in college, the hypertextual novel was coming up as the “next big thing.” It didn’t really become the next big thing.

Eve Sussman: Oh, where you would click and you sort of “create your own adventure”?

Guernica: Yes. There was a feminist revision of Frankenstein with v s
really obsessed. 

Eve Sussman: But the idea is that you read and then you could click on a piece of text?

Guernica: Right, more what the audience member was longing for.

Eve Sussman: I remember feeling frustrated by the hypertextual novel idea because (and I could accuse my own piece of this) it felt a little bit like an advent calendar. You flip up the windows on that advent calendar and it’s actually preordained what you’re going to see. The choice wasn’t a real choice. It was a choice that in a way had already been made for me. The hypertext takes you to a link and that link is linked to something that the programmer knows will be there. The fact that you couldn’t see all the hypertext at once felt frustrating to me. I remember feeling somewhat frustrated by it in a way that, somehow, *whiteonwhite* doesn’t frustrate me. And maybe it’s because it’s exactly what I said: that you, as the audience member, aren’t allowed to click.

In a way you could say that Malevich was looking for that utopian picture plane. You put a white square on a white square and it’s sort of the perfect bliss of a picture.

Guernica: I noticed that the name of the film changed while you were making it.

Eve Sussman: We created the film on the trains, in these hired taxis that were driving us 500 miles out in the desert. It was absolutely a road movie where we made up what was going on, and you can see Jeff’s character changing as he grows into that 1970s geophysicist nerd-with-the-big-glasses-and-trench coat. In the same way that

it was an organic process of shooting and making up the narratives, the underlying story about Mr. Holz being trapped in City-A, we were also kind of organic with the title. First it was called “*whiteonwhite: A Random Noir*” and then Jeff Garneau felt very strongly that it’s not random, it’s algorithmic. So we ended up with a much more cantankerous title “*whiteonwhite:algorithmicnoir.*” Jeff really would just call it “*whiteonwhite,*” but I don’t feel like doing that because that’s like [Malevich] Malevich painting and it’s now only tangentially related to that. That’s what inspired the project. The title still doesn’t fit quite comfortably because it’s too long. I’m living with it.

Guernica: Was Malevich just a jumping-off point or did you end up dialoguing with his ideas and work, as the piece progressed?

Eve Sussman: It was all about dialoguing with the ideas and the megalomaniac writings of Malevich. The famous quotes are, “I’m the commissar of space,” or, “I’m the chairman of space.” Jeff and I took that and asked what if you take a literal reading of that, not just the space of the picture plane but actually outer space? We were looking at some of the writing, the drawings and paintings as architectural code and also for the metaphorical condition you could find within some of those statements. He would say things like, “We are in a desert,” “We’re alone,” and it was all about trying to find this transcendent moment within the picture plane.

In a way you could say that Malevich was looking for that utopian picture plane. You put a white square on a white square and it’s sort of the perfect bliss of a picture. But then that utopia is inevitably not sustainable; it has to fall apart. In our story, the utopia is this unsustainable place where they’re making three types of water and where people are losing language and where everything may be controlled by this company called New Method. So yes, the Malevich idea certainly influenced a lot of those ideas about transcendence and the desire for utopia and the unsustainability of that desire.

Guernica: Were there other influences?

Eve Sussman: Initially, I was also influenced by an early Dashiell Hammett book

called *Red Harvest*. I thought “Maybe we can just transplant *Red Harvest* to this funky ex-Soviet numbered town,” and I did kind of lift some ideas from the book. But it’s nearly impossible to get the rights to *Red Harvest*. The family of Lillian Hellman is reluctant to give them up. It’s never been directly adapted into a film for a number of reasons. It was all about the coalmines in Butte, Montana: this coal mine, this one coalmining factory, a company that controlled the entire town and the entire government of the town. So that idea is part of our sub-plot: the New Method Oil Well Cementing Company controls the entire town and it’s spiking the water with lithium and time is slowed down to keep the workers more complacent. They get more hours to the day, and that’s why Holz keeps trying to get his watch fixed and people are also running out of language or perhaps he’s just crazy. But there were little subplots that came out of the noir of Hammett.

Guernica: The New Method Oil Well Cementing Company sounds like something out of the Human Potential Movement.

Eve Sussman: I used the “New Method Oil Well Cementing Company,” which—if you Google the New Method Oil Well Cementing Company—was the original name of Halliburton. And at every little cinderblock shithole airport that you fly into in that part of the world, there are five or ten Halliburton guys getting off the plane. New Method Oil Well Cementing Company, how do you get a better name than that? It doesn’t get better than that. The other thing about Aktau, the real Aktau, not “City-A”: when the Soviets first built it there was no water there. So they built a nuclear power plant to desalinate the water. So you have to have a nuclear power plant to make the water. The hubris and the insanity involved in that just seems so profound.

When you go to Star City where they train the cosmonauts outside of Moscow, it looks like a derelict 1950s college campus. Everything’s unpainted, everything’s crumbling, and they don’t give a fuck about the window dressing.

Guernica: Utopian ideas often take place in godforsaken places, because the land is cheap or because the members need to stay away from anyone who's going to come down on them...

Eve Sussman: It's like the Pilgrims coming to America. They were  to build a utopia, Plymouth Rock or whatever. You have to be separatists in a way. In the case of Aktau, your people need water so if you're not going to find water there you're going to make it. You need huge amounts of energy to desalinate water so you're going to build a nuclear power plant to do it.

Guernica: Is there anything that you're thinking about, especially now that the show just closed in New York?

Eve Sussman: Yes. Jeff Wood, one of my main collaborators, said something really brilliant the other day about the utopian ideal. He said that when we look at these landscapes that we think of as dystopian, they're really just our infrastructure. That really nailed it. These things that we look at as these horrifying sort of industrial landscapes and these pipes that are all above ground that are carrying all this stuff—whether it's in the middle of Central Asia or you're driving over the Pulaski Skyway—it's just our fucking infrastructure. It's just what's keeping us all going. We think of it as this Blade Runner dystopian landscape. But that's what keeps our modern contemporary lives available and possible in the way that they are.

Guernica: Why don't we want to see it? Why do we see it as dystopian?

Eve Sussman: When you go to these Soviet and Russian places they put all the pipes above-ground. They didn't care. When you go to Star City where they train the cosmonauts outside of Moscow, it looks like a derelict 1950s college campus. Everything's unpainted, everything's crumbling, and they don't give a fuck about the window dressing. Especially in America and I would say in Western Europe—Germany, Northern Europe especially—they're extremely concerned with how things look. In America, we really have this idea of what a plaza should look like and what the front garden should look like. Your lawn has to be kept in a certain way, and you better water it. We have those ideas of the suburban lawns and if you don't clean

up your lawn in your typical American suburban town, you'll get a note from the town council saying "Your lawn is not a garbage dump. You can't have ten trucks and three motorboats on it," or something. It's expensive to bury the pipes. Just put them above-ground and build some arches so the trucks can drive under th



Guernica: I am interested in the idea that we could have also been raising thinking the pipes and peeling paint were beautiful, or at least normal. It is sort of a received idea that they're not.

Eve Sussman: Right. I think, again, especially in the Western sensibility, we want to think that we're preserving this historical architectural beauty. We're very concerned about fashion in a way that some other countries either don't care or don't have the money to. It's not even that they think putting the infrastructure and the pipes and everything above-ground is beautiful; it's just utilitarian. It just has to be that way. It's functional.

Guernica: That's why utopian societies invented things, because they were so hyper-efficient. Many of the religious societies thought that the Messiah was coming, so they didn't have a lot of time. Their desire to "get ready" inspired them to back up and get new perspective on uses of materials.

Eve Sussman: Right. And the Soviets are also very efficient, like amazing engineers. I mean the rocket that they sent Yuri Gagarin up in is still used. When you go and see it, you can't believe they sent a human to space in an asbestos ball with what looks like a bunch of batteries and duct tape and explosives strapped to it. They're still using that asbestos ball. The irony is that our shuttle can't run anymore. We can't get people back and forth from the International Space Station. The Russians have to do it.

Guernica: I'm still stuck on the image of humans in asbestos balls with duct tape.

Eve Sussman: It was big news for a few days in the *New York Times* and then it was no longer the news anymore. But it's such a deep rich irony. After all these years of the Russian-American space race, we have to pay thirty million dollars every time

you want to send an American up to the ISS.

Guernica: Do you have a sense of what's next?

Eve Sussman: I'm very interested in trying to do a piece about the l  industry. But exactly how to get there is a whole other question. Talk about the infrastructure that we can't see! I had a really strong idea when I first read the *New Yorker* article that came out exactly a year after the fall of Lehman. I read that article and I thought, "Oh my God, I could shoot this as a five camera take at a round table with these cameras on a lazy susan and ten businessmen." It would have to be all men. And then I realized it would have to be a really dialogue-driven piece, and I just thought I needed a writer to write it. I reached out to a few people and then I got so involved with the algorithmic movie that it got back-burnered. I have a lot of smaller works I want to do, too. I'm really excited about doing more theater and more live performance-based stuff.

Guernica: My partner was asking me about the movement to move your money into the credit unions—she was getting at, "What do you think will happen if everybody moved their money?"

Eve Sussman: I've thought about the same thing. On one hand you wonder will it make those credit unions just start acting like the big banks? You have to really trust those people in the credit unions, right?

Guernica: Can you really cripple a big bank?

Eve Sussman: It's hard to say. That's tied to the question of "What is the Occupy Wall Street movement going to do?"

Guernica: I was going to ask you about that.

Eve Sussman: How much of a critical mass of people do you need to move their money into one of these credit unions to lessen the power of the big banks? I feel like the average lay person, myself being one of them, doesn't really understand the

infrastructure well enough to know what it would do. I assume it would do something. I would like Arianna Huffington to tell me, because she was one of the first people to start proselytizing about that idea, and she's a smart woman.

I think Occupy Wall Street managed to change the political dialogue in a matter of weeks. They were completely ignored for the first week or two and now it's in the major press every single day in every country in the world. I feel excited about it. I mean, do I want it to have some kind of manifestation in mainstream politics? On one hand I think some of those people who are actively down there protesting, some of them would probably say, "Fuck mainstream politics, we need a complete revolution." I think we need laws about political donations. I think we need laws about corporations' involvement in government. I would hope that the movement would have strong immediate repercussions in mainstream American politics, because I do think legislation does change lives.

The reason we're still here in this building is because there was legislation, the loft law that changed our lives, that made it possible for me to still keep my studio. So that little bit of legislation affected a lot of artists in Brooklyn for instance, all over New York. And that has repercussions for the cultural life of New York and for the economy of New York and repercussions for the community. The fact that a law can keep the real estate industry at bay is personally very important to me, obviously for my own livelihood but for the whole community that I'm attached to. I was just seeing the art community cut off at the knees especially in Brooklyn. I want to vote for Elizabeth Warren. I want Elizabeth Warren to be our next president.

Guernica: You're not alone.

Eve Sussman: Oh man, that woman just rocks and she would get elected, because she's just got it all. Unlike Hillary Clinton who seems a little two-faced and is abrasive, she's completely embraceable. She's got the personality. She's so fucking smart. [Like her,] I'm always thinking of the desire for the perfect life based on sustainability. I do think the coming wars are going to be water wars. On the front page of the *New York Times* recently, a farmer in a dry field is being paid by groups connected to the U.S. government to sell his water; that water has become a

commodity and now it's going to become much more precious than oil. They're considering desalinating in Las Vegas, they're desalinating in parts of California, it's not just in Saudi Arabia and China. The coming water wars will be within the next fifty years, I feel sure of that. I think the whole thing about worrying ; sort of a minor issue.



When everything falls apart, you very quickly become tribal. Quickly the money becomes worthless and what matters: Do you have food? And can you defend yourself?

Guernica: It's interesting that every utopian conversation has to somehow go...

Eve Sussman: Back to oil and water.

Guernica: Or go back to "the apocalypse." Speaking of oil and infrastructure, I should say for the recording where we're sitting in Williamsburg, which has been besieged not only by the oil spill but other toxic burdens and companies that—

Eve Sussman: We have the concrete company right out there that blows silica every day. Williamsburg or Greenpoint is probably the most toxic neighborhood in New York City. Greenpoint especially.

Guernica: The oil spill here was three times the size of the Exxon Valdez spill.

Eve Sussman: Right, underneath people's backyards. We're all dependent on that infrastructure, so there's hypocrisy there. We're never going to go back to not using all this electricity and all this power and all of our gadgets. I own five computers. Apple's the devil. I don't think they're evil but I think that we've become dependent on all this stuff and I do think we kind of have to think our way out of it. It takes a huge amount of willpower and a lot of government legislation. It's not just willpower and responsibility; it has to become an obligation. I'm as wasteful as the next person, even though I'm trying to grow tomatoes in my loft. I was curious if I could grow stuff

in the house. It's kind of working. I picked a bunch of them the other day. I'm curious about what the end will look like. Do we have 100 years? Do we have 200? Are all of these things going to end up in this apocalyptic thing? Do you think?

Guernica: I really do feel that within these extreme religious narratives  "end-time," there's a secular version that totally makes sense to me. This idea of terrible trials. I just don't see it as something that God is imposing, though.

Eve Sussman: When everything falls apart, you very quickly become tribal. Quickly the money becomes worthless and what matters: Do you have food? And can you defend yourself? Is the landscape really dystopian, or is it really just the stuff that keeps you alive that you're used to not having to look at?

Guernica: Does the possibility of the latter make you look out this window differently?

Eve Sussman: Well, I did start realizing that a lot of the stuff that we went all the way across the world to film—I could film it right here.



To contact *Guernica* or Eve Sussman, please write [here](#).

Tags: art, dystopia, eve sussman, suzanne snider, Suzanne Snider interviews Eve Sussman

