

# METRO PICTURES

"Meg Stuart & Catherine Sullivan," *Bomb* (Summer 2008): 28-35.

## BOMB



Meg Stuart, performance photo of *It's not funny*, 2006. Photo: Chris Van der Burght. All images of Meg Stuart performances courtesy of the artist and Damaged Goods.

## Meg Stuart &

I was introduced to Meg Stuart's work in the late '90s by Catherine Bastide, my gallerist in Brussels. She knew that I was interested in dance and encouraged me to approach Stuart, whom she was very enthusiastic about, regarding a collaborative theater work I was making. I learned that Stuart, an American, and her company Damaged Goods had been established in Brussels for a few years, and that, in fact, they already were involved in a number of collaborations with other choreographers and visual artists. As is usually the case with things you're interested in but haven't yet seen firsthand, fantasy starts embellishing the information at your disposal. A pleasantly distorted

and potentially misdirected view of works of art by another person can persist for years. The self-consciousness people displayed when struggling to describe Stuart's work made me particularly curious. When I finally saw the piece *Alibi* in 2003, I understood why Stuart's work resisted being summarized: it is enormously confident but at the same time spectacularly full of doubt. Although there are no obvious idioms at play in her pieces, they have a palpable sense of familiarity and recognition. They are fiercely introverted and precarious, yet also affirm presentation and display. Part of the pleasure of experiencing them, for me, comes from seeing all those plates spin in

**MEG STUART** Cis Bierinckx, the artistic director of Beursschouwburg, wants to bring you to Brussels. But, you're very expensive, he says. (LAUGHTER)

**CATHERINE SULLIVAN** It's not that the work that I make is so expensive. As you know, working in an ensemble-based medium, you can perform in your street clothes and not have lighting or sound, but you still have to eat and travel. In terms of your own productions, how do you negotiate that interface between

**having to deal with management or administrative duties and then your work itself?**

**MS** Damaged Goods, my company, is based in Brussels and deals daily with the management of my work. I was one of the first foreign artists to receive subsidies from the Flemish government, and I've managed to maintain that center of support. My artistic home is in Brussels. I am in a lucky situation in that I don't have to beg for a project to be made because I get an annual subsidy.

Catherine Sullivan, installation view of *Triangle of Need*, 2007; 16mm film transferred to digital media (tri-channel, black-and-white, sound); 16mm film transferred to digital media (four channel projection, black-and-white/color, sound); 16mm film (black-and-white/color, sound). Total running time: 56 minutes. All images of *Triangle of Need* courtesy of the artist, Walker Art Center, and Metro Pictures.



# Catherine Sullivan

the air. I was happy to be in discussion with her in Berlin last December, and find out more about the space she has insisted upon to make her work.

—CATHERINE SULLIVAN

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To be honest, I wasn't aware of Catherine Sullivan's work until we were both teaching at the Mobile Academy in Warsaw in 2006. I'd heard people drop her name but I got more intrigued and fascinated by her art through the lecture and workshop she gave. These even led me to study her movement approach and scores. Her eclectic work in theater

and film reveals a complex and intelligent take on performance art. She explores the foundations of dramatic conventions and means of expression, and filters them out from multiple historical references. Her works read like manifestos in their formal questioning of visual arts, theater, music, performance art, and literature. They are dense, cryptic, uncomfortably familiar, and elegant. I have rarely seen a visual artist approach movement with such sophistication. Catherine is also interested in the emotional tension between representation, the performers, and the public. We met through our shared practice and thoughts.

—MEG STUART

**CS** Do you feel that having a place to create has impacted what you've allowed yourself to think about and do?

**MS** When I was in New York I wasn't creating much work. When I moved to Brussels my work erupted because I had the time and encouragement to make it. Somehow being displaced, working with dancers who aren't necessarily in their hometown, speaking in English—which might be their second or

third language—and repeatedly performing in these strange patterns and loops of festivals together, creates a certain culture where you're in dialogue with people, but you're not engaged in a city as a place. You're a step apart. It's something much stranger than being an outsider. The bodies in my pieces are constantly negotiating their boundaries, often their center has exploded—it's all over the place, shifting, transferring. Yes, you respond to the



Meg Stuart, performance photo of *REPLACEMENT*, 2006. Photo: Chris Van der Burght.

place you're in, but you also bring your interests and needs wherever you go.

**CS** But the struggle is if you bring your regional symptoms with you, how can those be turned into a representation that makes sense locally? Do you think about the degree to which what you're doing might *not* have an articulate relationship to its local surroundings?

**MS** It always feels like a project is happening at the right time. When I started to work on *ALIBI*, which explores fanaticism and secondary violence, I was looking through Hollywood films, sporting events, press photos, and books wondering how you can represent that on stage without faking it. We started working on it in July 2001, and the premiere was in November 2001. So 9/11 confronted our project in a very direct way, as we watched from Zurich how the media responded to the event in New York. I couldn't have said, I'm going to make a piece about that moment. But already these links and intersections were there. It happens all the time in the work.

**CS** In performative or ensemble-based media, the degree to which you can't control the way people absorb and respond to things, and the way they carry their own artistic motivations and desires into the work is interesting. It's an odd thing to describe what your art is when so many of your desires are mediated through the desires of others.

**MS** I always return to myself, go back to my own research and language. But out of that, I allow the issues and intentions, the material of others, to help

shape and influence the work. It's the history of collaboration. Everybody on- and offstage constructs their reality at every moment. What fascinates me are the inevitable holes in these realities: that other people don't easily fit into our scripts, or circumstances force us to improvise. In every performance there are hidden layers being revealed. My performers rarely have fixed characters or behaviors, so they can readily fall into holes of alternative realities. They do this, as in life, as a way of escaping an uncomfortable present. In dance I try to physicalize the noise, the distractions, the projections that one experiences when meeting another person. Usually I set up a concrete

Catherine Sullivan, *Triangle of Need*, 2007, installation view, Walker Art Center.



situation: two people will be having a conversation, then one of the performers might slip into a memory space embodying a past event or a virtual fantasy, while the other performer remains in real time (as real as that can be on stage). Sometimes the absence is commented on, sometimes it isn't. Both performers might become overwhelmed by an emotion, and this emotion is exaggerated and blown up into a movement sequence that swallows the original task of conversing. The choreography traces the performers entering and exiting the present.

Sometimes outside factors demand that my dancers look at a situation differently, as in *REPLACEMENT*, where the stage designer Barbara Ehnes configured a room as a laboratory, a stage within a stage, which rotated 360 degrees, forcing the performers and the audience to take other perspectives.

A work begins with a few words or questions. For *REPLACEMENT*, "monstrosity" and "anxiety" led me to human experiment. Can we look at theater as a human experiment? How can the studio be recreated as a laboratory? I often create a think tank with my collaborators. I overwhelm the process with images, films, texts, clips, improvisation sessions, and workshops by various experts—all related to the piece. Eventually all the input is transformed, it's filtered and reduced and the work gets put out there. By performing it, by its interface with the audience—but very rarely at the premiere—the piece becomes its form. Which is very different, I'm sure, than how you work. I don't know if you write scripts or you—

**cs** Everyone in the project has a different job to do. The production coordinator requires totally different information than the actors. I like to put material into the form the user needs. I don't like to generate one master document. I am often amazed at what everyone is working with in the end because what each person is referring to looks completely different and reflects the particular way that they have engaged with the material. For

*Triangle of Need*, I was working with the filmmaker Kunle Afolayan, who was very specific about the kind of script he felt he could work with, so I had to create a typical screenplay that was never used by the actors. There are drawbacks to working this way—often I am working in anticipation of what the ensemble will need. I then have to sift through the devices I have created for them in order to situate myself.

**ms** Do you mean that you have to make space for yourself in your own work?

**cs** Yes, because I'm always making calculations about how a given presence or persona will be animated through certain devices. The whole question of instruction or direction becomes very strange; it doesn't have clear origins.

**ms** How does your work evolve? Visual artists seem so much more surgical in what it means to make a shift, what impact that change might have.

**cs** The work evolves through many strategies, even the most mundane, like counting and the numerical scores we used in *The Chittendens*. It evolves through a certain promiscuity with cultural objects, be they real events, products of ideological regimes, or other works of art. We generate a considerable amount of behavior in rehearsal and I am usually thinking about what will happen when it is manifested within the setting. As soon as the ensemble does their work, you have a real ecology of sorts, and I try to work with it internally, exploring its own symptoms. For instance, in *Triangle of Need*, Sean Griffin and I were working with a character, Eulalie, who is the subject of songs by Stephen Foster and poems by Edgar Allan Poe. I had mistaken her for a gypsy in a silent film scenario from a catalogue used by James Deering, the owner and builder of Vizcaya, the opulent mansion that was the setting for the film. We felt that the racial politics of the time in which Vizcaya was built—the 1910s—were important, and so we put this character forward as a result of the many uncomfortable inferences she generated, many of which involved our own racist symptoms.

Then there are the banal aspects of handling the material—modulating it, struggling to control it, asking it to speak, asking it to shut up, and then getting it dressed, shot, edited, and installed. I don't have so much contact with the audience once the works are up and running. That's one of the reasons why I wanted to stay connected to theater and performances. I really enjoy it when the ecology I have "authored" mutates to include an audience whom I know nothing about. With installations, you have an opening and then you're on your way somewhere else.... It's also interesting to see things play out with a variety of performers, in a variety of contexts. Finding people who are really amenable to this is the trick.





Meg Stuart, performance photo of *MAYBE FOREVER*, 2007. Photo: Chris Van der Burght.

**MS** So you get a lot of resistance. How do you relate to the word “resistance”?

**CS** You can probably remember a time, maybe when you first started working, when you had to engage with the ensemble as a mediator. You develop devices to compensate for their fatigue, their suspicions, their desires, their lives. You are asking them to respond to methods that you have invented and which don't always work. But I have always looked at the alternative, which would be a kind of churchlike environment where they have to put their own issues aside—this does not appeal to me at all. It's gotten easier over time, but I've conducted many rehearsals and taught workshops full of mutiny. This was the case with *Ice Floes of Franz Joseph Land*, for which I asked performers to repeat gestures, scenarios, and physical states over and over again, often arbitrarily. I was interested in the sense in which arbitrary tasks were antithetical to the comfort and security of those that were logically motivated. I was interested in the brutal aspects of the arbitrary and how it brought out negative human qualities. But it was useful and meaningful. There was a lot of resistance to this in rehearsal, but, in the end, when all of the elements came together, the ensemble understood that it was mechanized for a reason. I've found really good people who can usually find their own ways into the material. This question you ask about resistance strikes me as political and personal in that it reveals what's vital about your motivations in the

**work and the world. Resistance from others also clarifies what you want. What has galvanized a sense of resistance for you?**

**MS** I don't enjoy resistance when I experience it with my collaborators and dancers, as I feel very exposed and vulnerable in the studio. I can accept it in audiences, to a degree, as they are confronted with the work. I try to resist all forms of apathy, indifference, and carelessness. Often my performers are fighting invisible forces. They are haunted by something or someone. There are unresolved issues of manipulation and control in my work. Bodies are manipulated. The first statement I make when I teach a class is, “Your body is not yours.” This can allow for a lot of freedom but it can be very disturbing as well. Then, “Who owns your body?” Then, “Let's speak about possession. Let's see the body as a container, the body inhabiting other sources, being a filter.” All these issues come right from the work, and we go from there. Of course, the more successful you are, the more open people are. You don't need to defend your method.

In a solo work, *soft wear*, which I still perform, my posture suggests the question: Who do you want me to be and I will play that for you? Then I proceed to propose different images and people morphing from one to another. I manage these shifts by thinking that every member of the audience is perceiving me differently, projecting their desires and ideas onto my body. The images are never completed. They are constantly arriving and dissolving and overlapping, so that my left and right side, upper and lower body often have

very contrasting textures and intentions. This allows for many monstrous and unusual connections, which I try to integrate through my movement.

**CS** Yes, but you're working within your artistic milieu. I often become confused because I don't exactly know what mine is and that's okay. I often like to work with people who have no investment in my artistic milieu. I like the fact that making films and theater works presents a number of different problems because the art-making itself is the result of a social agreement, and not everyone is always convinced. My method is often an issue: it is demanding physically and in terms of concentration, and it is also a place for behavior that is considered embarrassing, culturally.

I would love to watch a rehearsal of yours at some point—seeing your work I don't have a sense of exactly how it's made, but maybe it's a form of scripting. How do you go about that? Do you figure it out in rehearsal?

**MS** I always try to have a very precise task, some special structure or relationship that we explore through improvisation. Maybe it's a fragment that I keep looking at from different points of view and angles. At one point I give up responsibility for the material and throw it to the camera, and when a certain scene is where I want it to be, I'll have the dancers learn the material exactly from the tape, with every little mistake. This will take days. It's not about trying to improve the movement, but about accepting the version completely—that's where the rigor comes in. I make a lot of material directly from improvisation.

**CS** I find that I can't go back and watch rehearsal tapes, there are just too many of them. For me it's more about the security that every permutation of an idea is documented, but I usually move forward with what I can keep in my head.

**MS** In your video pieces it seems that the performers are suspended, or rather caught in time, forgoing notions of beginning, middle, and end.

**CS** They are coping with tasks in the present tense, and histories that are forced upon them as recurrent sensations.

**MS** Well, their coping strategies are very impressive!

**CS** The performers are immersed in a struggle with a regime greater than themselves and I like to see what results as a matter of their attempts to "self-possess." Living in a country that very easily wields its brutality in a variety of ways—wars, economic and cultural aggression—has been well worth considering through the work. But I'm not in jeopardy, nor is the art, nor are the people in it. So it's a matter of creating analogs that attempt to get at some of the same incoherence I'm concerned about or fear in the world. There is then a historical specificity in the work, which considers interconnections between those things like brutality and arbitrariness as they relate to other situations in the world, in history. Examples would be the shooting of *Ice Floes* in the Polish American Army Veterans Association in Chicago or returning to the auditorium in Aachen, Germany where Joseph Beuys and a group of students got into a fist-fight. Real places are interpolated with the values

Catherine Sullivan, still from *Triangle of Need*, 2007.





Meg Stuart, video still of performance of *soft wear*, 2000–2001.

and orthodoxies that have been imposed on the performers—they are asked to compensate for all of it in the performance, and often they can't bring it under their control. Sometimes you can see them refuse to try and this too becomes a matter of self-possession and self-preservation. Their resistance is often through humor; as my good friend and composer Sean Griffin says, "I trust laughter."

There are aspects of your work that relate to this sense of self-control and compensation for being out of control. The body is trembling and in crisis, but this same body creates the state of trembling, demonstrating it's in full control. It's a funny problem and in your work it becomes epic.

**MS** I could say that, for me, all movement expresses desires, not simply the physical or erotic or material desire of wanting, owning, or inhabiting something, but the desire to make contact, to expose oneself to the viewer and the other on stage. Ultimately, movement also expresses and incorporates the missing, the failed communication, the censored, and all conditions real or projected that block any action from taking place. Perhaps all the reasons one is not able to cope within a given situation.

What about failure? There is nothing I like more than to see someone on stage attempting an impossible task: not arriving, making a second futile but braver attempt, and then eventually giving up the task. Maybe that is why critics have called my work Beckettian. I often disconnect when I see performers easily accomplish actions on stage. I only realized two years ago that my dancers had been performing a perverse form of slapstick all these years. My choreography can be very fragmented. I'm amazed that my dancers are able to physically assimilate all that complexity—a 21st-century model of virtuosity. Every few seconds they can be in a completely different

state—from an internal wish or desire, or from something imposed. And yes, there's a weird, sick pleasure in watching that as well.

**CS** I work with both people who aren't trained as performers as well as those who are and I feel excited by immersion, that transformed, heightened state, but I also like performers who can't immerse themselves but try. I like working with people who are distracted and mentally occupied with other things; that can be useful. The most interesting rehearsals are the ones where you have a full spectrum of investment from the performers. I often like to work with people who are there to pass the time.

**MS** But, I feel that they experience an underlying sense of being manipulated or tugged at, forced in all ways—powerlessness. It's through the repetition, the insistence, and by digesting it and spitting it back out that this other power emerges.

**CS** That catharsis can be kind of scary.

**MS** It is scary.

**CS** On some level, the paratheatrical aspect of the performing arts has crossover with the therapeutic sciences. The body is the instrument and has to make itself available not only as a subject but also as an object. When I was an actor I always miscalculated this relationship, and in the end the characters I played were vulnerable because I couldn't get the proportions right. Is this vulnerability something you have played with in staging some of these odd social misfires that interest you?

Catherine Sullivan, still from *Ice Floes of Franz Joseph Land*, 2003, five-channel video installation transferred from 16 mm film (black-and-white, sound). Total running time: 60 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures.



**MS** There is a distance implied in the misfire. It's the basis of slapstick, of humor. It's so human because you see the intentions and the will or the desire as well as the failures at every moment. In *Visitors Only*, I deconstructed a party scene featuring these misconnections and meetings. I continued to explore this in *It's not funny*. I am fascinated with social choreography, the unspoken rules of encounter and how people's physical presence bodily affects their relationship to themselves, to the other, to the space. There's a constant energetic exchange just in looking and being seen. It is very complex to make contact with another person, so much goes on. To reveal and to expose that can be embarrassing, painful, awkward. But it can also be a release.

**CS** **I believe it is a positive social act to create a place for behavior that is considered embarrassing, culturally. I think all of the work I have made has some element of watching the performers try to assimilate the social occasion of the theater. I am less confident about how this functions in my work in film.**

**MS** Because it is viewed in the visual arts context, but how did your training in theater inform your particular, eclectic style?

**CS** **In a positive sense, it was strenuous and demanding on both a physical and a psychological level. It really prepared me to be patient, to struggle in front of others, to watch them struggle, to collaborate and to be willing to devote a lot of time to making things. It gave me a sense of the "profession," which I could see in some circumstances as useful and in others as completely arbitrary and irrelevant. There wasn't a lot of thought about acting as a form that could have a more strategic use. There was no performance theory for the actors other than script analysis and neither was there discussion about theater as a particular mode of representation. It was an atmosphere that created a spectacle of symptoms. It was unapologetically ahistorical but at the same time embraced tradition and convention. For some people this would be hell, but I loved it. Looking back, now I think I was responding to the positive energy of artifice, the pleasure of being part of an ensemble, and the strange effect of present subjectivities trying to engage with those of the past through dramatic literature. I often feel sidetracked by having to account for these concerns within the visual arts, and so I am often afraid that the work is referred to as being far more complex than it actually is.**

**MS** What's the fear? I deal with this also. Actually my problem is that people think my work is too far out.

**CS** **I think people can assimilate a lot of complexity; it relates more to the obligation that institutions and presenters often feel they have to their audiences. It should simply be made clear that**

**the interpretation of art, like many things in life, requires an investment of time. It's gotten chronic and really unfriendly to the artist. I refuse to believe that there's not an audience for what you're doing in the States.**

**MS** People are studying dance. They're studying dance history. They're maybe even studying performance and performance theory. Despite all that knowledge, I don't know if there are the conditions to create work in a rigorous way or for audiences to consistently follow the development of a choreographer. I don't know where those pockets and spaces are. It is a crime what's happened in New York—the pushing of experimental artists and audiences out of the center to the periphery. Most of the dialogue revolves around practicalities, getting your work produced, etcetera.

In what sense is your work choreographic? Do you describe your performers as dancing? What about time issues, in terms of duration or development of an idea?

**CS** **There have been some ideological moments in dance that I've been interested in because they were so emphatic. The period of Judson Dance Theater interested me for this reason, so I have worked with dance as an orthodoxy. I have also composed dances to music from things like oratorical manuals. I have worked on different strategies with actors where we vary the proportions of gesture to psychology in given sequences. This can produce something that's not exactly dance or acting. Then there is always the opportunity for additional emphasis between the performer and the stage or the camera—this always involves choreography. The dance that greatly inspired me on a methodological level was the butoh of Tatsumi Hijikata and his lead dancer Yoko Ashikawa. This was dance beyond choreography, beyond composition in a sense. Literally, what the performers in my works are doing is coping. They are coping with instructions and demands, and whether this produces acting or dance, I don't know. It's grounded in their response to the task, and their perspective on it.** [Read more of Meg Stuart and Catherine Sullivan's conversation on www.bombsite.com.](#)