Afterall

Catherine Sullivan (in collaboration with Sean Griffin), 2006, *The Chittendens*. Installation view, La Collection Lambert, Avignon.

Catherine Sullivan (in collaboration with Sean Griffin), *The Chittendens*, 2005, 35mm production still from five-channel 16mm film to digital projection

Fixed Explosive: Catherine Sullivan's Choreography of Stasis

— Catherine Wood

Whether the 'ordinary dance' of Yvonne Rainer, the ballet-derived language of Michael Clark or the mass, participatory actions of artists Francis Alÿs or Katerina Šedá, each time I have written about choreography, I have considered it in fairly specific terms: as a form with the capacity to conjure utopian visions of social life, and as one that might, in aesthetic ways, reinvent relations of communality. Drawing inspiration, in part, from Andrew Hewitt's observation of dance's combined

Catherine Wood locates in Catherine Sullivan's fascination with the gesture a collision between moving image technology and the contemporary social subject.

status as depiction and performative generator of relationships in his book *Social Choreography: Ideology as Dance and Performance in Everyday Movement* (2005), I have thought about choreography's evolution from medieval folk to the Renaissance, and traced the origins of 'ordinary dance' in the 1960s back to ballet's role as an extension of courtly etiquette. All of these readings of dance treat it as a deliberate, learned manner of movement, whether practiced or directed, with a sociopolitical dimension.

The choreography at play in Catherine Sullivan's work is something else. Appearing to privilege internal impulse over external form, Sullivan's work seems to be about exposure rather than aspiration. Crystallised in emblematic works such as *D-Pattern* (2004) or *The Chittendens* (2005), Sullivan's choreography offers, perhaps, a register of our world rather than a proposition for how we might live in it differently. Dance is inherently concerned with moving: whether as physical passage (to aesthetic ends) or as a conceptual implication of progression, with utopian ambition. Sullivan's choreographic

movement is curiously static on both counts, however. Hers appears as a kind of involuntary dance form, one that its performers strive to repress.

A five-screen installation, *The Chittendens*, is set partly within a suite of offices that are in various states of order and disrepair. One might imagine an episode of a legal drama, maybe *Ally McBeal* or even *Mad Men*, being shot in the beige-carpeted and curtained entrance lobby, with glass panels and a splashy abstract painting on the wall, in which the piece begins. As the camera tracks through from room to room, though, other spaces appear that are heaped with junked office furniture, broken lamps, a trashed photocopier; another room yet is white-washed and more derelict still with a view onto an empty parking lot. The spaces in this piece are populated by a shifting cast of sixteen actors in various kinds of costume: contemporary office-wear, a 1950s holiday camp rep's uniform, theatrical 'period' sailor suits, Edwardian bodices and straw boater hats. The actors perform abbreviated, repeated gestures in isolation, each one facing towards the horizontally tracking camera, never seeming to connect or communicate with each other. Their movements and sounds (often screams, or deep breaths) have a hysterical quality, like manic tics. Occasionally an actor will visibly relax into a charming smile, but such naturalism is quickly truncated, and the actor stiffens again, joltingly, into an asymmetric motion that implies anxiety or collapse.

D-Pattern (2004), a precursor to this piece, was a stage performance captured on film and re-worked as a double-channel installation piece. As in *The Chittendens*, Sullivan layers the action using a translucent montage technique for the film presentation, but here there are a larger number of actors also in an assortment of period costumes, mostly black-and-white, and some with painted face makeup, positioned across the gradient of a vast,

exposed and stepped stage. In both pieces, all the narrative indicators — the settings, the costumes, the acting — are presented in a disintegrating state that takes the performers' roles and dramatic conventions apart in a way that pushes beyond the logic of deconstruction.

Logic is a *faux ami* in Sullivan's work, in fact. In discussions about how the work is made, the artist has frequently spoken of her use of numeric sequences — working with her collaborator, Sean Griffin — similar to those used in modernist scoring strategies by musicians and choreographers of the 1960s, after John Cage. In making *The Chittendens*, she has explained that she assigned fourteen singular 'attitudes' to each of the sixteen actors.[1] The attitudes were then interpreted according to strict schemes that were transferred to numerical patterns and performed rhythmically in different tempos. 'The attitudes could be minimised or maximised [...] reduced or expanded in physical form [...] abbreviated or extended in terms of time,' she says.[2] Sullivan's professed use of these discrete 'attitudes' (sets of adapted, expressive gestures) as compositional units has dual significance: firstly for a consideration of her work as choreography, and secondly as choreography that is inherently formed by the intersection between bodies and moving-image technology.

The notion of the 'discrete gesture' has something in common with nineteenth-century scientific studies of gesture as universal language. In *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872), Charles Darwin explored the idea that people made similar physical gestures in similar social or emotional situations across cultures. In the early twentieth century, such ideas of physical lexicon were transposed into more abstract theories of 'eurhythmics' (Émile-Jacques Dalcroze) or 'biomechanics' (V.E. Meyerhold): gestural forms were related specifically to musical rhythms or gymnastic or acting exercises, reflecting broader ideas of utopian community via group choreography and interaction. The 'discrete gesture' has equal resonance with images of the body captured in photography and film, which were beginning to be explored at the time.

Eadweard Muybridge's choreographic breakdown of ordinary movements proposes an underlying quality of stillness to the passage of the body, for example, in movement that is segmented into a sequence of positions, appearing as an array of discrete gestures; gestures that might become moving images once more when re-animated by film (or the flick book). More generally, these stop-start forms of dance point to the underlying stillness of film: 'Death 24 times a second' as Laura Mulvey put it.

An early work of Sullivan's, *The Chirologic Remedy* (1999), manifests her fascination with the idea of a formal language of gestural expression. The film is composed of movements drawn from the oratorical art of chirologia, or chironomia, defined as the art of using gesticulations or hand gestures to good effect in public speaking. Effective use of the hands, with or without the use of the voice, was developed and systematised by the Greeks and the Romans.[3] Various gestures had conventionalised meanings that were commonly understood, either within certain class or professional groups, or broadly among dramatic and oratorical audiences. Despite being underwritten by an invented gestural lexicon, however, the sequencing of movement in Sullivan's work does not build into legibility. Her choreography feels complexly corrosive rather than generative. Whilst early twentieth-century movements such as German expressive dance sought to free the body from oppressive social norms and codes and re-naturalise inner rhythms and expression, with the aim of rejuvenating both the individual body (and the social body as a result), Sullivan's choreography depicts a body caught in a state of 'possession' by the mediated environment in which it exists. For example, if Mary Wigman's *Witch Dance* (1914) was emblematic of the spirit of early twentieth-century expressive dance in its attempt to channel 'primal' energy and allow 'primordial forces'[4] to take command of her dancing body, Sullivan's work manifests a state of possession by technology: one in which the cutting rhythms of film and, moreover, television editing

1   Catherine Sullivan, quoted in Annette Südbeck (ed.), *Catherine Sullivan: The Chittendens* (exh. cat.), Vienna and Berlin: Secession and Revolver, 2005, p.16.
2   *Ibid.*
3   Catherine Sullivan in conversation with the author, unpublished, 2010.
4   See Jack Anderson, *Ballet and Modern Dance: A Concise History*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992, p.173.

have taken hold of the expressive capacities of the body (and hence its involuntary impression).
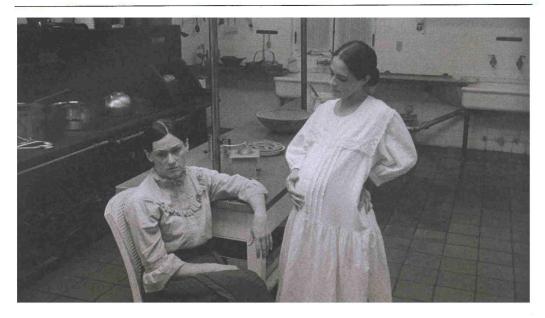
The elaborate web of references that Sullivan details as sources for the making of her work — feature films, news reports, musicals and theatre plays — appear, also, as something of a distraction from this powerful formal impression. Her massed staging of performed movement carries a sense of that implied or associative content in its dramatic pitch, without being explicit about the sources or the narrative material. But what is important is that the sources, like the work, are primarily filmic or televisual, and it is fundamental that her choreography is mostly made specifically for film and video, or — even when live — performed through a deep understanding of moving-image technology and its capacities, as well as its pervasiveness in contemporary life.

Sullivan's choreography dramatises a collision between the elastic capacities of film and video — the dislocating processes of editing such as jump cuts, crossing the axis, shot-counter-shot or montage — and the contemporary human subject. Sullivan extends to the post-1980s video age the tension captured in Man Ray's famous photograph *Explosante Fixe* (1934), which shows a dancer in full pleated skirts caught in the midst of motion, her head blurred out in the swirl. The 'fixed explosive' moment, a form of André Breton's 'convulsive beauty' was defined by its paradoxical rendering of mobility as immobile, but remaining somehow pregnant with motion, and the photograph has subsequently been seen as emblematic of the 'photographic condition of Surrealism' [5] But whilst Rosalind Krauss wrote about 'camera seeing' as a prosthetic extension of the body's limited capacities — 'the camera mediates that presence, gets between the viewer and the world, shapes reality according to its terms' Sullivan's medium is embedded in the psyche of the subject to an extreme degree.[6] In Sullivan's work, the human subject is represented as being drawn and quartered across the surface of the moving image (think Sycorax imprisoned by Prospero in a tree via Jean Baudrillard's observation that by the end of the twentieth century 'the video camera is in your head' or Dara Birnbaum's Wonder Woman and Paul Pfeiffer's endlessly looped sportsmen). Each of Sullivan's attitudes is a register of the subject's state of possession by the medium:

the way in which those attitudes are rhythmically combined takes on the imprint of television editing or viewing, both in their buildup of fragmentary impressions and the continuous deferral of narrative conclusion.[7] In writing about television 'audience culture' Norman M. Klein has analysed the extent to which the constant interruptions of commercial breaks force television into a fragmentary pattern that requires only a superficial level of engagement. He writes: 'Gestures, images, lighting effects repeat so often on television they apparently are received more as a rhythm than a coherent statement. Flashes of information must be highly abbreviated, so familiar to the viewer that only an outline or a phrase is needed.'[8] Sullivan has similarly discussed the arbitrary impressions of 'character' generated by the cumulative effect of her scored and repeated gestures in terms of an exploration of US philosophies of self-possession or self-determination,[9] but they appear as much to be about the possession of flesh by technology, showing the body to be not just mediated but ridden by it.

In his 'Notes on Gesture' Giorgio Agamben observes that the medical conditions of ataxia and dystonia, neurological disorders that cause twitching or repetitive movements in muscles, must have, somehow, 'become the norm' during the twentieth century. This observation derives from his attention to the disappearance of any recorded cases of Tourette's syndrome (a condition which leads the sufferer to lose control of their gestures) until Oliver Sacks believes that he spots three in one day, walking the streets of New York in 1971. At some point everybody had lost control of their gestures, Agamben writes, 'and was walking and gesticulating frantically.'[10] Despite the elaborate process that generates the actors' movements, Sullivan creates an aesthetic equivalent for this impression of 'lost control' in her work. And yet again, within the convulsive tableaux that she constructs, the combined rhythms of the repeated attitudes and of Sean Griffin's musical score bind the activity together, incorporating the gasps and outbursts into its skilfully scored syncopation of gesture, sound and image. And although it is far in character from the

7   Interviewing Sullivan's collaborator Sean Griffin, Pierre-Yves Fonfon asks, 'Are contemporary musicians like you allowed to be influenced by soap operas?' Griffin replies, 'I find histrionic suspended narratives lasting twenty-five to thirty years very interesting. [...] All of this massive drama is played out with hyperbolic emotional themes, cloying melodies and manipulative mood setting. [...] I am a huge fan of *Dark Shadows* series. Its sole purpose was that of sustaining colourful suspense and dramatic tension for one hour every weekday for over five years.' C. Sullivan et al., *Catherine Sullivan, op. cit.*, p.55.
8   Norman M. Klein, 'Audience Culture and the Video Screen' *Illuminating Video*, New York: Aperture, 1991, p.375.
9   C. Sullivan et al., *Catherine Sullivan, op. cit.*, p.18.
10   Giorgio Agamben, 'Notes on Gesture', *Means Without Ends: Notes on Politics* (trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000, p.104.

Catherine Sullivan (in collaboration with Sean Griffin, Dylan Skybrook and Kunle Afolyan), *Triangle of Need*, 2007, film stills from eight-channel 16mm film to digital projection. Courtesy the artists
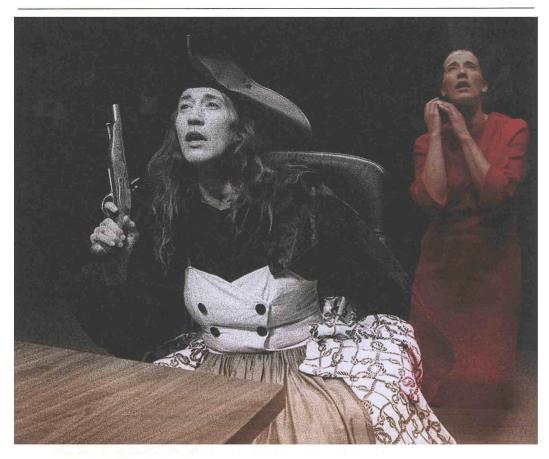
'pedestrian choreography' of Simone Forti, Yvonne Rainer or Trisha Brown — work that was often inserted, near invisibly, into the scenography of everyday life in New York City in the 1960s and 70s — the compressed gestural language of tics, attitudes, repetitive motions and sounds that are a fundamental feature of Sullivan's work conjures a potent and poetically condensed aesthetic equivalent for the experience of twentieth-century urban modernity. That her work is made for — and fundamentally formed through an engagement with — film and television brings it right up to date. Sullivan's choreography comes closest to creating a theatrical image equivalent for the disjunctive co-existence of the anonymous mass of people on a contemporary city street — a city street which, in the early twenty-first century, is dotted with surveillance technology.

It is revealing to note that Sullivan was taught by, and has since collaborated with, Mike Kelley, whose fascination for the surrealist undertow in contemporary culture and writings on Sigmund Freud's essay 'The Uncanny' (1919) are well known. In his collected essays, *Foul Perfection* (2003), Kelley discusses Freud's identification of the 'repetition compulsion' in the unconscious mind: 'a recognition, in the conscious mind, of this familiar but repressed compulsion that produces a feeling of the uncanny' [11] Freud's

discussions of the confusion between animate and inanimate in his notion of the uncanny — often located in figurative objects such as 'wax work figures, artificial dolls and automatons' — is a clear influence on Kelley's figurative sculpture project by the same name.

Sullivan's actors, and their movements, have a similarly disturbing puppet-like quality. The truncated and repeated movements, gestures and sounds that they perform *en masse* are all severed from any context. Their actions do not create a sense of forward movement, and neither do they tell stories. The most useful analogy between this charged immobility and a form of mass cultural image-making is, I think, to be seen in the sports montage, a particular kind of montage assembled on television after football matches and the like. The ecstatic pitch of these sequences contains a quick-fire juxtaposition of isolated gestures that draw from a rule-based game for a group of players and build — not to tell a story — but to confirm an outcome: 'we won!' The sequence of gestures runs through from the goal shot to the crowd's roar to the footballer punching the air to the team embrace. The gestural moments do not give the twists and turns that a dramatic narrative would rely upon to hold an audience's attention, but are piled together as repeat iterations of the same celebratory affirmative. But in Sullivan's case, it is a repeated negation.

11   Mike Kelley, 'The Uncanny' *Foul Perfection*, Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2003, p.72.

Sullivan turns this 'piling' of isolated gestures to a different end while still operating with a similar kind of insistent pitch. But that pitch, or mood, is an iteration of a void within the work: a disturbing absence where one expects the narrative content to be. It is as though Sullivan takes the elements of costume, setting, 'acting' that might coalesce together to form a semblance of naturalist 'narrative' and unmasks them, revealing their ultimate incoherence. Sullivan brings to the fore a degree of stasis and incomprehension that acted naturalism or choreographic phrasing ordinarily masks. Her actors display the discombobulated disparity of character that the notion of 'personality' attempts to synthesise. Whilst early twentieth-century Surrealism dealt with the individual psyche, using automatic writing, 'objective chance' or dream images as sources for making work, the attitudes and movements in Sullivan's videos and performances are partly generated through the use of improvisational acting exercises worked out within the group. 'Every "scene" she has said about *The Chittendens*,

projected a uniquely suggestive situation or emotive context between participants and this was always changing depending on the partnership. The patterns allowed us to see this changing, but what exactly was changing we didn't have a name for Sean refers to it as something like a Ouija board a conjectural machine that wasn't there.[12]

Through this adapted notion of performative free association between participants, Sullivan reinvents Surrealism's neuroses as a social condition, played out through a lexicon of dramatic forms and attitudes that are clearly borrowed or learned from external sources, and exchanged between members of the group not as primary reciprocal communication, but as an exchange of oblique forms.

Catherine Sullivan, 2005, *The Chittendens*, film still from five-channel 16mm film to digital projection. Performer: Stephanie Hecht. Courtesy the artist

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12   Catherine Sullivan in conversation with the author, unpublished, 2010.

Concluding his 'Notes on Gesture' Agamben goes on to discuss Deleuze's argument about movement-images, proposing that 'there are no images but only gestures' [13] By this, he explains,

Every image, in fact, is animated by an antinomic polarity: on the one hand, images are the reification and obliteration of a gesture (it is the imago as death mask or symbol); on the other hand, they preserve the dynamis intact (as in the work of Muybridge, or any sports photograph). [...] Even the Mona Lisa *or* Las Meninas *could be seen not as immovable and eternal forms, but as fragments of a gesture or as stills of a lost film [...] And that is so, because a certain kind of litigation, a paralysing power whose spell we need to break, is continuously at work in every image: it is as if a silent invocation calling for the liberation of the image into gesture arose from the entire history of art.*[14]

It is not a 'paralysing power' but an animating one whose spell possesses Sullivan's gesturing subjects: she returns the 'liberated' image-gesture to a sense of stasis, despite the fact that it is set within a moving-image tableau. Sullivan's actor-dancers never reach their destinations or complete expressions that they begin. Each gesture appears as less a destiny than a dead end. Although she makes group choreography, the participants appear each to be locked in isolation, albeit a shared experience of such. The precise, rhythmic staccato gesticulation of her 'dancers' has a look that has something in common with the compulsive spasms of the dancers captured in Joachim Koester's film *Tarantism* (2007). But whereas that piece derives from a kind of hysteria, of group ecstasy and liberation, the performers in Sullivan's group appear to loop back, again and again, towards an imprisoned state, their energy channeled into a dissonant, drone-like quality. The writings of cultural theorist Mark Fisher in his book, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (2009) conjure an image of the Western world at the beginning of the twenty-first century that makes sense of Sullivan's contemporaneous vision. He speaks of late capitalist society in terms of stasis, describing a state of 'exhaustion, of cultural and political sterility' [15] where it has become impossible even to imagine any alternative to the dominant ideology, and any path for action. This condition of 'reflexive impotence' is linked in Fisher's thinking to a constant but unproductive expenditure of energy that takes the form of a kind of digital fidgeting: he writes, 'the consequence of being hooked into the entertainment matrix is twitchy, agitated interpassivity' [16] The utopian aspiration of historical artistic forms becomes fossilised and impotent within such a pervasive mindset: 'modernism is now something that can periodically return, but only as a frozen aesthetic style, never as an ideal for living' [17] Sullivan's moving images of group choreography dramatise this condition of interpassivity as an animated pause. Built upon repeat patterns of stylised gestural expression, they loop one question to the point of negation: what can we do, and where can we go, with this new movement vocabulary?

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13   G. Agamben, 'Notes on Gesture' *op. cit.*, p.107
14   *Ibid.*, p.108.
15   Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, Hampshire: Zero Books, 2009, p.7
16   *Ibid.*, p.18.
17   *Ibid.*