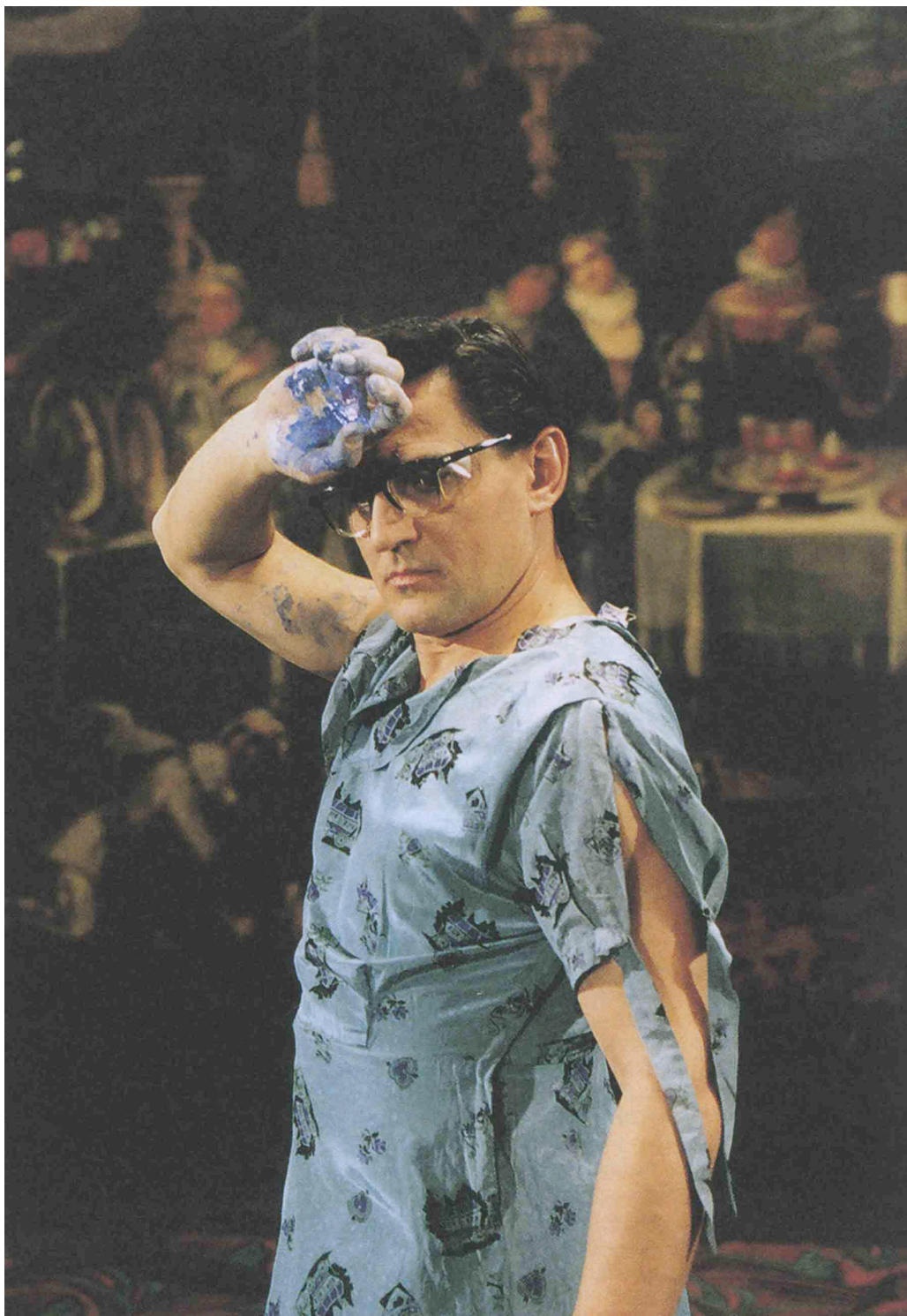


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Catherine Sullivan,
*'Tis Pity She's a
Fluxus Whore*, 2003,
35mm production
still from two-
channel 16mm film
to digital projection.
Performer: Andrzej
Krukowski, Filliou
Action. Courtesy
the artist

Virtuosity and the Survival of the Subject: On Catherine Sullivan

– Thom Donovan

Catherine Sullivan's work involves nothing less than the problematic of virtuosity. The virtuosic as it pertains to performance history (film and theatre), but also, to quote the Italian philosopher Paolo Virno, the virtuosity of post-Fordist labour practices, practices which entail an 'immaterial' 'living labour' of the contemporary subject. Before I come to Sullivan's work, however, let me dwell on Virno's notion of virtuosity for a moment. To be a virtuoso, in the traditional sense, is to be able to perform a score in some extraordinary way. In Virno's book *A Grammar for the Multitude* (2002), he poses the question: 'If the entirety of post-Fordist labor is productive (of surplus-value) labour precisely because it functions in a political-virtuosic manner,

believe can help us approach contemporary art practices, and particularly the practices of artists who make the connection between labour and performance explicit through their works. What might connect contemporary labour and live art are questions of virtuosic labour – contemporary live art being both reflective and critical of practices of virtuosity in the global work place.

Virtuosity, according to Virno, was a quality once accorded to the politician's public role. Recalling Hannah Arendt's distinction between the artisan and the politician-citizen, Virno reiterates throughout his book that the artisan produces objects while the politician-citizen produces actions. To be objectless, to produce an immaterial product from one's effort, was once the place of the performer-cum-politician-citizen. However, in post-Fordist societies, this productive model involves the common labourer, forced into a situation in which he or she must become malleable enough to perform whatever task or situation presents itself in order, simply, to survive. The call centre worker, the tech supporter, the person working behind a drive-thru counter number among the post-Fordist work force because the object of their labour is not material, but cognitive, communicative and affective. The virtuosity which the common labourer is forced to perform is hardly glamorous, a far cry from the concert pianist or exalted stage actor. In fact, the position of the labourer-virtuoso is typically one of abjection and poverty; so Virno writes, 'Nobody is as poor as those who see their own relation to the presence of others, that is to say, their own communicative faculty, their own possession of a language, reduced to wage labour.'² How do contemporary live art and performance practices reflect both the

Building upon Paolo Virno's concept of virtuosity, Thom Donovan looks at Catherine Sullivan's constraint-based performances through their reflection of post-Fordist labour conditions and practices.

then the question to ask is this: What is the script of their linguistic-communicative performances?¹ What, in other words, constitutes the score which the contemporary labourer *qua* subject performs and how do the conditions of the contemporary labourer *qua* virtuoso – whose product is immaterial – differ from the conditions of labour which preceded them, those in which a visible 'product' or 'object' was produced? How, likewise, does one judge the value of 'work' when what is produced are affects or ideas, and when this production process relies on improvisation? Virno and his contemporaries, the Autonomists, provide a number of concepts which I

1 Paolo Virno, *A Grammar for the Multitude* (2002, trans. Isabella Bertolotti, James Cascaito and Andrea Casson), New York: Semiotext(e), 2004, p.63.

2 *Ibid.*

poverty and transformative potential of these labour conditions?

Virno's dichotomy between the virtuosic, immaterial labour of a post-Fordist culture industry and that of the factory worker of the Fordist assembly line resounds with a number of performance practices in the post-War period. Here I am thinking of the performers, composers, poets and visual artists internationally who belong to the tradition of 'live' and what we might call task-based visual arts. Intermedia, happenings, Fluxus and the collaborations around Judson Memorial Church are some of the recognised movements; equally familiar are the names of John Cage, Jackson Mac Low, George Maciunas and Yvonne Rainer, among others who used instructions and procedures to generate their works. The partial radicality of the post-War avant-garde lies in its depersonalisation of the aesthetic process, a process of eliminating styles that had accrued and calcified around a high Modernist canon, and many of these artists of the post-War period seemed to be asking exactly how to move beyond this Modern style. How, even more importantly, to quit the question of style altogether? These works are also, arguably, an answer to new labour and communications practices that developed in the post-War period – and more broadly to labour practices that develop from constantly changing conditions which require the subject to opportunistically assimilate new technologies and skill sets.

While Sullivan's work departs from a variety of different performance regimes and gestural codes, one of the regimes that she continually refers to is such post-War, avant-garde performance communities as Fluxus and Judson Church. Sullivan's early play 'Grisly Notes and Tones' (1997/2001) makes reference to the film-maker and choreographer Yvonne Rainer through a photograph on the script's last pages. Likewise, in numerous interviews and presentations such as the one she gave at the New School's Vera List Center for Art and Politics in September 2009, Sullivan cites Rainer as an important touchstone for her practice. And in works such as *'Tis Pity She's a Fluxus Whore* (2003), Sullivan 'infuses' the stylistic regimes of Fluxus

performances at the Festival of New Art at the Technical College of Aachen, Germany in 1964 (an event during which Joseph Beuys was famously attacked by an audience of students) with those of seventeenth-century Jacobean drama, specifically the milieu of John Ford's play *'Tis Pity She's a Whore'* (1633).

Similarly, if one reads the work of Sullivan's collaborator, the composer Sean Griffin, beside her own, one realises Griffin's mutual debts to modes of composition based upon rigorous procedure, constraint and instruction. Specifically in Griffin's *D-Pattern* (made with Sullivan in 2004), a compositional procedure for movement, gesture and speech that grew out of Sullivan's collaborative performance works *Manifestation Lyon/Dijon* (2003) and *Audimax/Neustadt Manifestation* (2004), and which Sullivan and Griffin drew upon extensively for the choreography and music in their 2005 collaboration, *The Chittendens*, a multichannel film to digital work exploring different attitudes and gestures, one notices the influence of post-War avant-garde composition models such as those offered by Fluxus and Cage. As Griffin has said of the influence of Cage on *D-Pattern*,

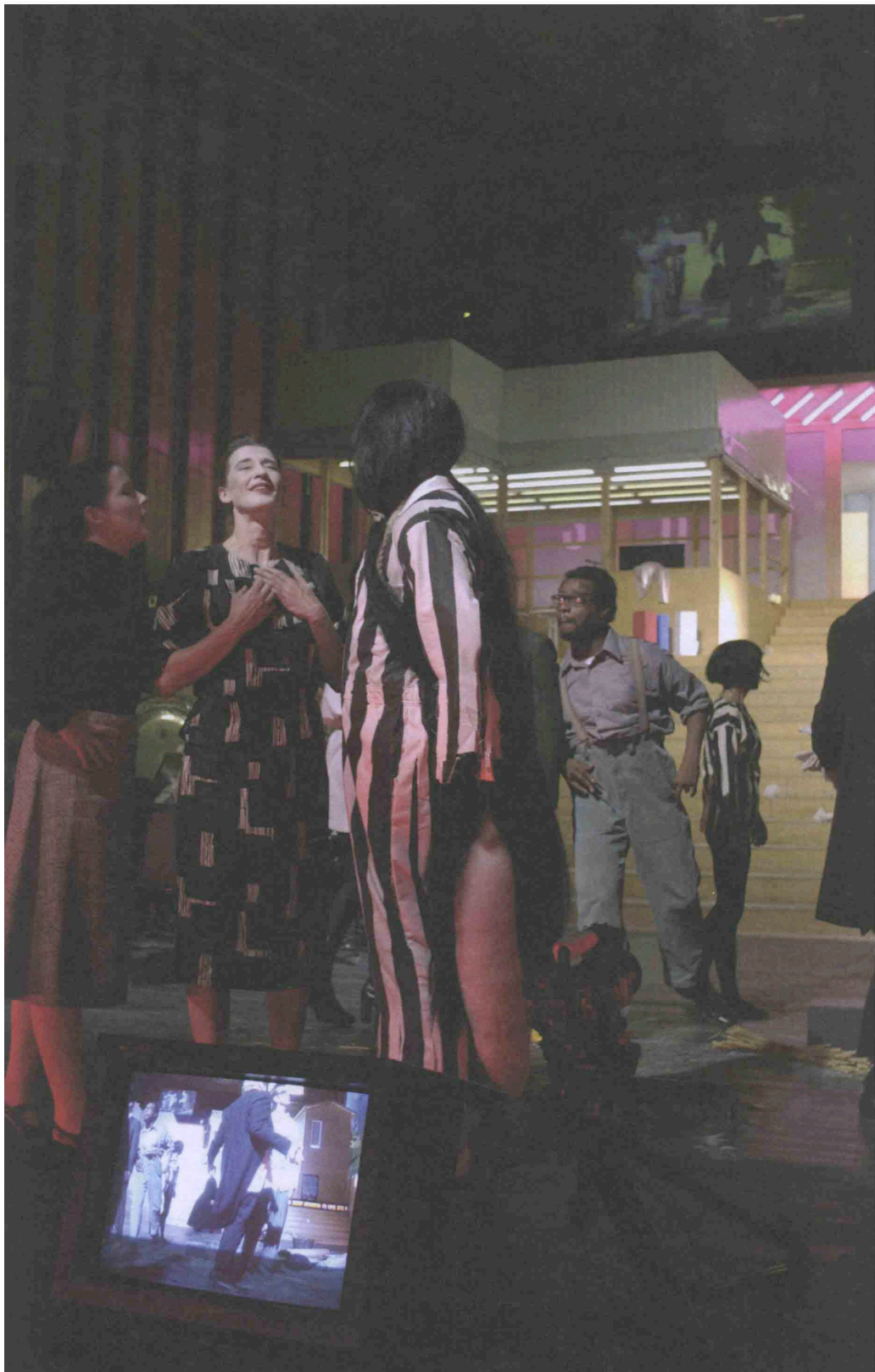
*My system of structural rhythmic patterns was developed with Catherine as a tool for regimenting body movements and expressive posturing of actors for a live, Fluxus-based reinterpretation. The Cage reference seemed appropriate. The most important musical element this basic pattern offered was on-the-spot access to a musician's orientation through stylistic choices.*³

In Griffin's work, as in Sullivan's, composition techniques are employed to discipline the bodies of the performers, who must assimilate a series of gestures and learn to perform them in strict numerical patterns accompanied by a soundtrack. One sees the rigour of *D-Pattern* in Sullivan's notes for the piece, which she handwrites on accounting logs.⁴ In the columns of the logs one finds combinations of fourteen gestures for sixteen performers. The gestures designated for Carolyn Shoemaker, one of Sullivan's long-standing performers,

Catherine Sullivan (in collaboration with Ron Athey, Sean Griffin, Mike Kelley and Stacy Ellen Rich), *Audimax/Neustadt Manifestation*, 2004. 'Neustadt' staging, Volksbühne, Berlin. Set by Bert Neumann for a production of Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*. Courtesy the artists

³ Sean Griffin in conversation with Pierre-Yves Fonfon in Annette Südbeck (ed.), *Catherine Sullivan: The Chittendens* (exh. cat.), Vienna and Berlin: Secession and Revolver, 2005, p.52.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.26–27





include 'catatonia' 'surprise chills' 'mean showgirl' 'virtuous woman retreats' and 'lynching' In Griffin's commentary about this score, he emphasises the overdetermined qualities of their narrative-gestural textures:

...many of the acting duets in the films are the result of tabulations of a series of Sullivan's scores based on the pattern. These scores provide a navigational tool guiding the actor through ephemeral materials using a fixed chart. They propose a strange kind of internal puzzle. There is a calculated, account-like approach to everything. Number and patterns are used to rationally organise something that is essentially subjective and fleeting. The actors do not embody the narrative; it passes through them in compositional relationships.⁵

Another way to read Sullivan's approach to performance regimes is through the work of Mike Kelley, with whom Sullivan studied at Art Center College of Design in Los Angeles in the late 1990s. If one reviews Kelley's work, and particularly his essays and critical statements about art, one realises just how many problematics Sullivan

and Kelley share. One relevant here is that of 'discourse' which Michel Foucault describes after Nietzsche as the problem of 'Who is speaking?' in the essay 'What Is an Author?' (1969). Discourse, in Kelley's work, may refer to the ways that artworks produce sites for disciplinary procedures. One of the primary sites of discourse in Kelley's work is the art school itself, and it is telling that many of his early works are involved in a project of deconstructing his education both at the University of Michigan and at Art Center College of Design, where Kelley was a student of John Baldessari and Douglas Huebler.

In *Educational Complex* (1995), for instance, Kelley constructs a scale model of the various art buildings where he was a student. The architecture of Art Center College of Design becomes a kind of bachelor machine/torture device, churning out students: 'In *Educational Complex*, an architectural model that reformulates every school I have ever attended into one "utopian arts complex" the sublevel is the point furthest underground. To get to it one must crawl under a table. [...] I have made it my project to reconstruct my missing memories of this site. Given the large number of rooms that I cannot clearly

Catherine Sullivan (in collaboration with Ron Athey, Sean Griffin, Mike Kelley and Stacy Ellen Rich), *Audimax/Neustadt Manifestation*, 2004. 'Audimax' staging, Rheinisch-Westfälische Technische Hochschule, Aachen. Tim Beamish, Wostell Action. Courtesy the artists

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.52.

⁶ Mike Kelley, *Minor Histories: Statements, Conversations, Proposals* (ed. John C. Welchman), Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2004, p.104.

recall, this is a daunting task.⁶ Educational training results in what Kelley calls, after alien abduction literature, ‘missing time’ – a time of screen memories masking repressed experiences.

Kelley’s work, through installations like the one just described, evokes a meta-discourse about art, and art education/professionalism, in which particular disciplinary regimes constitute the artist and the artist’s audience as subjects. This meta-discourse grounds a wider critique of cultural phenomena from a broad range of typically ‘low’ sources, marshalling the (often misapplied) tools of critical theory and psychoanalysis in order to critique and discuss such objects of popular consumption. Here, the Land O’Lakes butter icon, a kneeling Native American woman, becomes an object for psychoanalysis (‘Land O’Lakes/Land O’ Snakes’), as her breasts are noticeably displaced onto her knees. Many other figures from the dustbin of popular culture receive such treatment, such as the recurring character of the Banana Man – a local legend from Kelley’s Wayne, Michigan childhood. Incidentally, Kelley is one of Sullivan’s collaborators

Sullivan’s work extends from problems of cultural acquisition and training to the exploration of expressions of power across theatre, film, visual art and dance.

for her *Audimax/Neustadt Manifestation*, in which she invited Kelley and other colleagues to perform Fluxus-inflected works. One of the purposes of Kelley’s oeuvre, like Sullivan’s, as we shall see, is a broad, yet personal, analysis of how power functions through heterogeneous disciplinary regimes, and particularly through (arts) education, consumption, popular entertainment (kitsch) and cultural phenomena often deemed unfit for criticism and analysis, let alone art.

Considerable work remains to be done on the relationship between Kelley and Sullivan. Something that interests me in particular about the connection is how Sullivan’s work extends from Kelley-esque problems of cultural acquisition and

training to the exploration of expressions of power across theatre, film, visual art and dance. In all of these realms, signs of disciplinary acquisition and trauma accrue through gesture, as well as through the use of certain techniques, whether as movement procedures, or in regards to lighting, setting, costuming and elocution. Unifying Sullivan’s works is a rigorous yet ambivalent investigation of how power functions through sites of performance.

This investigation becomes most visible in Sullivan’s early performance works *The Gold Standard* (2001) and *Big Hunt* (2002), in which Sullivan re-stages scenes from various films in which the acting is particularly virtuosic – what Sullivan describes as ‘big-game hunting’ roles.⁷ Ingmar Bergman’s *Persona* (1966), Arthur Penn’s *The Miracle Worker* (1962), Robert Aldrich’s *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962) and Adrian Mitchell and Peter Brook’s *Marat/Sade* (1967) each involve roles that require virtuosity from their actors in order to not only play them, but, in Sullivan’s words, to ‘survive’ them.⁸ The language Sullivan uses to describe her understanding of the actors in these roles draws from Elias Canetti’s analysis of power in *Crowds and Power* (1960), a poetic-anthropological text devoted to the cross-cultural comparison of crowd behaviour in relation to communitarian and authoritarian expressions of power. Like the figures peppered throughout Canetti’s anthropology, who must continually metamorphose into other creatures and natural phenomena, Sullivan says of her actors that they must also ‘transform’ themselves in order to ‘survive’

‘Big’ and ‘little’[hunt] are meant to set up a comparative relationship between the two pieces in the installation, and ‘hunt’ refers to the dramatic stakes for the performers. [...] In both of the hunts the stakes relate to assimilation or elimination, confinement or liberation, by the actors’ capacity to meet the demands of the dramatic tasks they are asked to perform. I was interested in how this could be animated through a series of stylistic economies that would limit and restrict certain actors and meanwhile set others free. This would be contingent on their ability to manifest the

7 Russell Ferguson, ‘Sort of Excessive: an Interview with Catherine Sullivan’ in *FIVE ECONOMIES (big hunt/little hunt)* (exh. cat.), Los Angeles: UCLA Hammer Museum, 2002, p.27

8 *Ibid.*

codes of the five economies, transforming from one to another [...] For Canetti, transformation is a means of survival and resistance to power and can manifest itself negatively in the subject (in pathologies like hysteria, mania, and melancholia) or liberate the subject to a transcendent state of divinity. Imitation and simulation are the empowering aspects of transformation, and ultimately I wanted to address this in dramatic acting.⁹

These notions of survival and transformation, which appear early in Sullivan's career, impinge on ways we may think about the labour of the actor/performer in regards to the labour of contemporary subjects in an increasingly administered world. The forms and techniques in Sullivan's work, not unlike her task-based predecessors, reflect contemporary conditions of subjectivity and labour practices as a determining factor for inter/subjectivity. By framing conditions of contemporary subjectivity, Sullivan dramatises the stakes of the post-Fordist workplace as a site where the subject is constituted through modes of virtuosic performativity — performances which do not produce a particular object but which participate in both intellectual and affective economies.

The problem of survival dates back to Sullivan's work for her graduate thesis at Art Center College of Design, *Grisly Notes and Tones* (1997/2001), a play where a bear attack is staged in different theatrical modalities. To 'survive' in this case is quite literal, where virtuosity is a matter of life and death. It also looks forward to *The Chittendens*, which takes place in the building of an abandoned insurance agency and uses Thorstein Veblen's 1899 text, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, to explore pathologies native to the US insurance industry. This video also uses Griffin's *D-Pattern* extensively in order to score certain gestures specific to the work of insurance company administrators, employees and clients. What is immediately striking about the video is how the actors' gestures resemble involuntary movement: through them one registers an index of trauma and pathology, and the insurance industry emerges as a site

of ghostly 'working through' not unrelated to the claims they file. One particular actor repeats the words and gestures appropriate to an accident scene; another the numbers that he has crunched for a particular claim. We witness naked pathology arranged like a score for post-Fordist labour, the immaterial labour specifically of the insurance industry. *The Chittendens*, more than any other of Sullivan's works, deals with the bureaucratic labour place, the workplace as a model of other sites of administration and government.

The Chittendens' installation consists of a suite of five projections, the second of which is called *The Chittenden Screen Tests*. In this section of the installation one sees actors performing a series of gestures through the technique of *D-Pattern*, as throughout the suite, but here doubled by the superimposition of two images of the actor. While in *Big Hunt* and *Gold Standard* one viewed Sullivan's 'infusions' — her term for the combination of two or more styles or regimes — through the combination of certain sets, props, lighting designs and photographic images with certain acting styles, the infusions of *The Chittendens* are more literal, occurring through the superimposition of images of an actor performing the same gestures in two different period costumes — one from the early twentieth century and the other contemporary. Sullivan's comments about *The Chittenden Screen Tests* are striking, and reflect a view of survival, transformation and liberation in the labour of her performers that is similar to the one found in her statements about Canetti and 'high-stakes' acting:

The Chittenden Screen Tests were filmed in an executive boardroom. These screen tests present one score per actor in different costumes, filmed in two takes, one in black-and-white, the other in colour. The takes are then dissolved over one another, so that any inconsistency in the performance between the takes is revealed: The performer either unifies his action over two disparate moments in time, or fails to 'self-possess' in the boardroom's high-stakes ambience.¹⁰

In the context of Sullivan's essay, one could read 'self-possession' in terms of remaining

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ 'Catherine Sullivan Talks about *The Chittendens*, 2005' *Artforum*, vol.44, no.6, February 2006, p.176.



Catherine Sullivan, *Big Hunt*, 2002, 35mm production still from five-channel 16mm film to digital projection. Performers: Sarah Taylor, Jenifer Kingsley, Valentine Miellii. Courtesy the artist

'cool' in a high-pressure environment. But one could also see it in the context of post-Fordist labour practices, as another example of the performance of mastery over movement — or what would formerly be termed virtuosity — that has become integral to a subject's survival. In *The Chittendens*, Sullivan's investigation of various discourses is graphed onto the insurance industry, a milieu that becomes both historical and mythopoeic through its treatment by Sullivan. More than in any other of Sullivan's works, virtuosic labour and performance are conflated in gesture. The dystopian aspects of art historical 'task-based' performance come to the fore as one witnesses the connections between the immaterial labour of the workplace and that of the performers whom Sullivan employs.

While the content of Sullivan's most recent works does not concern labour practices *per se*, at least not in their content, they do nevertheless concern virtuosity and 'self-possession' in terms of formations of contemporary subjectivity. In Sullivan's elaborate eight-channel film installation *Triangle of Need* (2007), one of the principal narrative arcs involves a group of Neanderthals who have been imprisoned in order to become acculturated and assimilated into a 'human' population. In this work, tropes

of genocide, anthropocentrism and racist, pseudoscientific epistemology blend seamlessly. The traces of racial pathology are written into the work's script, which draws from a nineteenth- and twentieth-century imagining of the 'primitive' and specifically the culture of Neanderthals. Virtuosity involves performing humanity within an anthropological-disciplinary machine. To 'self-possess' and 'survive' in the atmosphere of a corporate boardroom or for Sullivan's Neanderthals, is to resist processes of acculturation organised by Western scientific epistemologies, late capitalism and colonialism. It is, in some sense, to find one's way out of these historical processes by giving form to their negative affects and overdetermining their own myths.