

# METRO PICTURES

Micchelli, Thomas. "Catherine Sullivan: Triangle of Need," *The Brooklyn Rail* (April 2008): 52-53.

## BROOKLYN RAIL



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

Take a particularly clammy chunk of Magic Realism—Gabriel García Márquez’s *The Autumn of the Patriarch* will do—cut it up into the discontinuous array of William S. Burroughs’s *Nova Express*, and you might come close to the incantatory and mesmerizing extravagance of Catherine Sullivan’s sprawling, multi-screen installation, *Triangle of Need*.

A work of this scale and audacity necessarily defies the ordinary tools of assessment; perhaps the most straightforward way to approach it is through the sources that Sullivan and her collaborators, composer Sean Griffin and choreographer Dylan Skybrook, have acknowledged in their writings. These include, for starters, John Cage and Merce Cunningham, Japanese Butoh and Pina Bausch’s *Tanztheater Wuppertal*, Edgar Allen Poe, Stephen Foster, *The Singing Neanderthals: The Origins of Music, Language, Mind and Body* by archeologist Stephen Mithen, and James Merrill’s epic poem *The Changing Light at Sandover*.

These influences are most apparent in the script, blocking, and scoring of the piece, which is performed by thirteen actors playing dozens of roles, shot in 16mm and presented, in the version mounted at Metro Pictures, on eight screens in three rooms. As with Bausch, there is no demarcation between acting and dancing, which can manifest itself in Butoh-like expressionistic extremes or Cunningham-esque patterns. The dialogue and part of what passes for a plot come from a six-stanza riff on Poe's poem "Eulalie" and a song of the same name by Foster and H.S. Cornwell, with additional lines credited to Sandover's Ouija board narratives, all translated into an invented Neanderthal language devised by Griffin.

As complex as this sounds, it doesn't begin to describe the visual opulence and intricate conceptual stratagems of the piece. While such a dense, heterogeneous mix might reasonably end up as an abstruse pastiche defined by its endnotes, Sullivan, Griffin and Skybrook, along with guest director Kunle Afolayan, have instead conjured a mad opera of sustained, sweeping and savage imagination uncontainable in a single form.

In the Metro Pictures installation, which was supervised by the artist and roughly follows the same layout as an earlier manifestation at the Walker Art Center and other venues, the work is divided into three parts, each running simultaneously. On a 16mm projector in one room, a short loop intercuts shots of a spinning figure skater with grainy footage from *quinceañera* celebrations in the gardens of the Villa Vizcaya, a kind of Xanadu-by-the-sea built in Miami by Chicago industrialist James Deering. In an adjoining chamber, three flat-screen televisions play the "Chicago" portion of the work, which is filmed in black-and-white and set in a tenement apartment peopled by early twentieth-century workers from Deering's agricultural equipment factory, along with a family of Gypsies (whose daughter, Eulalie, has fallen into perpetual sleep), a trio of Neanderthals, and Napoleon and Josephine, but more on that later. The third and largest room is outfitted with four separate digital projectors showing color and black-and-white scenes shot in and around the mansion of the Vizcaya estate, where the Chicago characters play supporting roles to a new cast of anachronistic degenerates.

Each of these sections has a different running time: the 16mm loop is six minutes, the Chicago section is twenty and the Vizcaya footage is thirty. The audio from the three screenings washes over the entire installation with a Cagean simultaneity that enriches the whole rather than distracting from each. This setup, however, is not the only version of the work. In a variation presented at a concurrent exhibition at the University of Chicago's Smart Museum, Sullivan (who is on the faculty of the university) has edited the Chicago and Vizcaya sections of *Triangle of Need* into a three-channel, 53-minute featurette, with the skater/*quinceañera* loop on a smaller screen off to the side.

Sullivan's embrace of aleatory indeterminacy extends far beyond the influence of Cage and the dissolution of definitive formal structure. In her hands it becomes a vessel for the infinity of overlapping and unfathomable narratives teeming through any one moment in time, an enormity of unknowing expressible only by a dream state. In an essay from the Walker Art Center catalogue explaining his *Sprechstimme*-style imaginary language, composer Griffin, who has collaborated with Sullivan on many of her projects, cites several Thomas Pynchon-worthy coincidences that provide a glimpse into the welter of meanings suffused in every image and sound. He notes that the archeologist Stephen Mithen has argued that Neanderthals communicated through a "half-spoken/half-sung" musical idiom, while the term "Neanderthal" is derived from the name of a 17th century German composer, Joachim Neander, who took to holding "private religious ceremonies in caves around Düsseldorf" where, almost two centuries later, the bones of the Neanderthal Man (in "Neander's Cave") were first found. He also mentions that James Merrill, whose *Changing Light at Sandover* recounts "strange preternatural messages from an extinct human species," was the "son of the cofounder of the Merrill Lynch investment firm, which opened in 1914, the same year construction began at Vizcaya."

The artists' treatment of premodern humans (one subplot involves a scheme to repopulate the Neanderthals) speaks to the core of the piece—essentially, what is it that makes us human and modern. "What must the Cro-Magnon have been thinking when he looked the Neanderthal in the eye?" asks a white-gowned aristocrat (in Neanderthal, of course, with English subtitles) near the end of the Vizcaya section. Sullivan and her collaborators embed that question in a framework that is both radically avant and bluntly elemental.

The camera floats through one elaborately staged mise-en-scene after another, à la Ophuls, with minimal cuts; arrayed across multiple channels, this creates a dizzying effect—the eye is directed within each frame yet it's free to focus on whichever image it chooses. Although replete with structuralist narrative complexities, Sullivan's ambiguity of intent is also a throwback to the most primitive forms of cinema, as described by Stanley J. Solomon in *The Film Idea* (1972): before directors began to make editorial choices determining the narrative and emotional thrust of a film, scenes were shot by a static camera as if on a theatrical stage “in which all subjects are visible from head to toe and in which the audience ... selects the area to concentrate on.” (Sullivan further evokes silent films through the black-and-white photography and early 20th century setting of the Chicago installment, as well as her technique of abruptly dropping the sound from dialogue sequences, sometimes in mid-sentence.) Additionally, the score is overlaid with what the composer calls “socially constructed notions of ‘the musical primitive,’” including re-created prehistoric flutes, “primitive analog synthesizers and vacuum tubes,” and arrangements of “early 20th century Romantic music, American parlor music, and [17th century] sacred music by ... Neander.” Simple and direct ideas are spun into a byzantine structure, evoking the labyrinthine path trod by our crudest urges on their way to sublimation in civilization's alienating systems of social control.

The chirps, whoops, grunts, gutturals and high-pitched squeals emanating from the characters' mouths over Griffin's unforgettably beautiful score, coupled with their spastic jerks and tremors under the starched linens of the working class and the silken finery of the overlords (think of Lars von Trier's *The Idiots* in period dress), are reminders that the line between brutishness and enlightenment is extraordinarily thin. In Sullivan's naked worldview, high culture is an artifact of greed, and the only qualities separating us from beasts are our rarefied forms of rage, lust and grief—rude truths belied but never betrayed by the work's transcendent splendor.

In his book *Allegories of Contamination: Pier Paolo Pasolini's Trilogy of Life* (1996), Patrick Rumble writes that “for Pasolini, cinematic language is ‘primitive,’ ‘irrational,’ ‘oneiric,’ [and] belonging to ‘untamed thought.’” The dominant impression of *Triangle of Need* is that, no matter how much time you spend with it, it's never going to make any sense. Sullivan understands that the paradoxes she has put into play can only be apprehended through the suspension of reason, and so, like David Lynch in *Eraserhead* or his recent three-hour masterwork, *Inland Empire*, she removes the assurances of a contextualizing storyline and plunges us into a world of primitive and irrational sensations. Anachronistic flourishes like the appearance of Napoleon and Josephine in a Chicago tenement, or the arrival of the Neanderthals at Vizcaya on a speedboat, compound the work's visual and aural simultaneity with an ineffable awareness of the swiftness and complexity of history. These sequences, along with the work's other discontinuities, such as its unmotivated emotional eruptions and unpredictable shifts of character and setting, lay claim to legitimacy (and overpower us with their devastating sensuality) because they're structured according to an intuitive dream-logic that, like the transgressive narratives of Lynch and Pasolini, cuts to the heart of cinema.

Sullivan weaves these subconscious webs around a premise that's brilliant in its simplicity: the ubiquitous e-mail scam enlisting the recipient's aid in securing the frozen assets of a recently deceased relative. In this case, the sender, Dr. Patrick Obi, is trying to track down family members of the late Harold Bowen, an engineer who was killed in an automobile accident, leaving an estate of \$20.5 million. Reciting the text of the e-mail, Dr. Obi and Mr. Bowen wander through both the Chicago and Vizcaya sections in their quest for next of kin, which, as Sullivan seems to suggest, is not only a condition we all share, but one that holds both fascination and horror over what we might find. To face our next of kin (be they Neanderthals or royalty; schemers, freaks, fools or thieves) is to stare into our own souls. It's a perilous terrain that most would prefer to avoid, but like an immersion in Sullivan's hallucinatory meta-reality, it leaves you with a heightened sense of being human just for having been there.