

frieze

When asked about the significance of the lighthouse in *To the Lighthouse* (1937), Virginia Woolf replied that it represented 'nothing'. 'One has to have a central line down the middle of the book to hold the design together'¹ she wrote. Exemplary of mid-20th-century literary Modernism, Woolf's novel conjures a disorientating stream of consciousness hinged on a desired journey. Yet the lighthouse as a beacon and destination is at odds with the experience of reading the text, which immerses the reader without clear guidance. Maud Ellman has observed that 'Virginia Woolf as a child remembered lying in bed in the family house, listening to the waves beating their "tattoo" against the rocks below (this tattoo seems to have left its mark on the musical structure of her fiction, where meaning drifts away from the logical surface of the narrative into undertows of rhythm and recurrence)'.

For her recent piece *The Chittendens* (2005) – a six-screen installation set in the offices and mythological fiction of a 'regional insurance company past its prime' – Catherine Sullivan was drawn to the symbol of the lighthouse. In a previous work, *D-Pattern* (2004), working with composer Sean Griffin, the artist experimented with numerical patterns adapted from the early scores of John Cage (specifically for percussion ensembles and written between 1938 and 1942) and 'scored' the repetition of actors' tasks performing 'attitudes' of emotions and gestures.² Although the foundation for *D-Pattern* was derived from a specific narrative – a violent physical confrontation between audience and performers at a Fluxus event in Aachen in 1964 – Sullivan became interested in the extent to which the 'attitudes' she developed from this story, through working individually with the actors, metamorphosed into habitually repeated idiosyncrasies and habits, resisting overriding choreographic direction. Furthering this experiment in the development of *The Chittendens*, Sullivan observed: 'Having animated the performers

beat by beat, their resistance or failure with the scores can be seen as having either a liberating or restrictive function, depending on individual execution, and this drive towards "self-possession" became the metaphor to be further generated by the *mise-en-scène*'.³

In the image of the lighthouse Sullivan found 'the crudest metaphor' available to represent her interest in 'self-possession and self-direction as an individualistic, exploratory and angst-ridden logic'.⁴ Specifically, the artist was struck by a corporate symbol for an insurance agency she happened to see called 'The Chittendens' and, in developing the piece, fictionalized the company employees as being related to 'an early class of American blue bloods famous in the nautical industry'.⁵ In the opening section of *The Chittendens* an actual lighthouse is depicted as a super-real archetype with red and white stripes, set in a crisp blue seascape. Sullivan was intrigued by the fact that the lighthouse is a frequent subject for popular American painting, one that might be related to the history and myth of the USA's founding 'discovery' by travelling pilgrims on ships. Whereas Woolf treated its presence as a structuring anchor around which her characters' emotional states ebb and flow, Sullivan treats it as a beacon for both the content and form of her piece. By employing a regional insurance company as a ready-made, Sullivan stages a set of relationships between the individual subjects in the work and the socio-economic context to which they belong. The significance of the lighthouse in American culture to ideas of 'self-possession' and self-direction lies in a basic philosophical sense of steering one's path in life, and speaks of the free market economy's co-option of notions of pioneering worldly success.

Sullivan returns repeatedly to 'self-possession' and the 'defining patterns of self' as they hinge on the relationship between bodily gesture and narrative. Most of her works

begin with stories, blending histories, fiction and current events. From these threads she extracts individual expressions or movements to form a condensed vocabulary of gesture. *Five Economies (big hunt/little hunt)* (2002) is a five-screen video installation, plus a smaller monitor, whose succession of staged scenes is taken from films that include *The Miracle Worker* (1962), *Marat/Sade* (1967), *Persona* (1966) and *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962), as well as imagined episodes from a news story about Birdie Jo Hoaks, a 25-year-old woman who attempted to pass as a 13-year-old orphan in order to gain state benefits. *Ice Floes of Franz Joseph Land* (2003) is formed of expressive moments distilled from the musical *Nord Ost* (North East 2001) and the novel *Two Captains* (1939), by Veniamin Kaverin, on which *Nord Ost* was based, with the haunting presence of imagined scenarios from the Chechen terrorist siege in the Moscow theatre where the musical had been playing in 2002. By isolating and compacting the most heightened melodramatic moments from these narratives – akin to the front page newspaper image – and working with actors who employ their own inflection, Sullivan positions the acting subject at the nexus of multiple cross-currents of fact and fiction. Her approach connects Baroque ideas of the 'world as a stage' with an individual's subjectivity – a repertoire of generic gestures derived from extreme particulars. An early manifestation of Sullivan's approach can be seen in *The Chirologic Remedy* (1999), which was based on a 17th-century public speaking manual focusing on the art of moving one's hands.

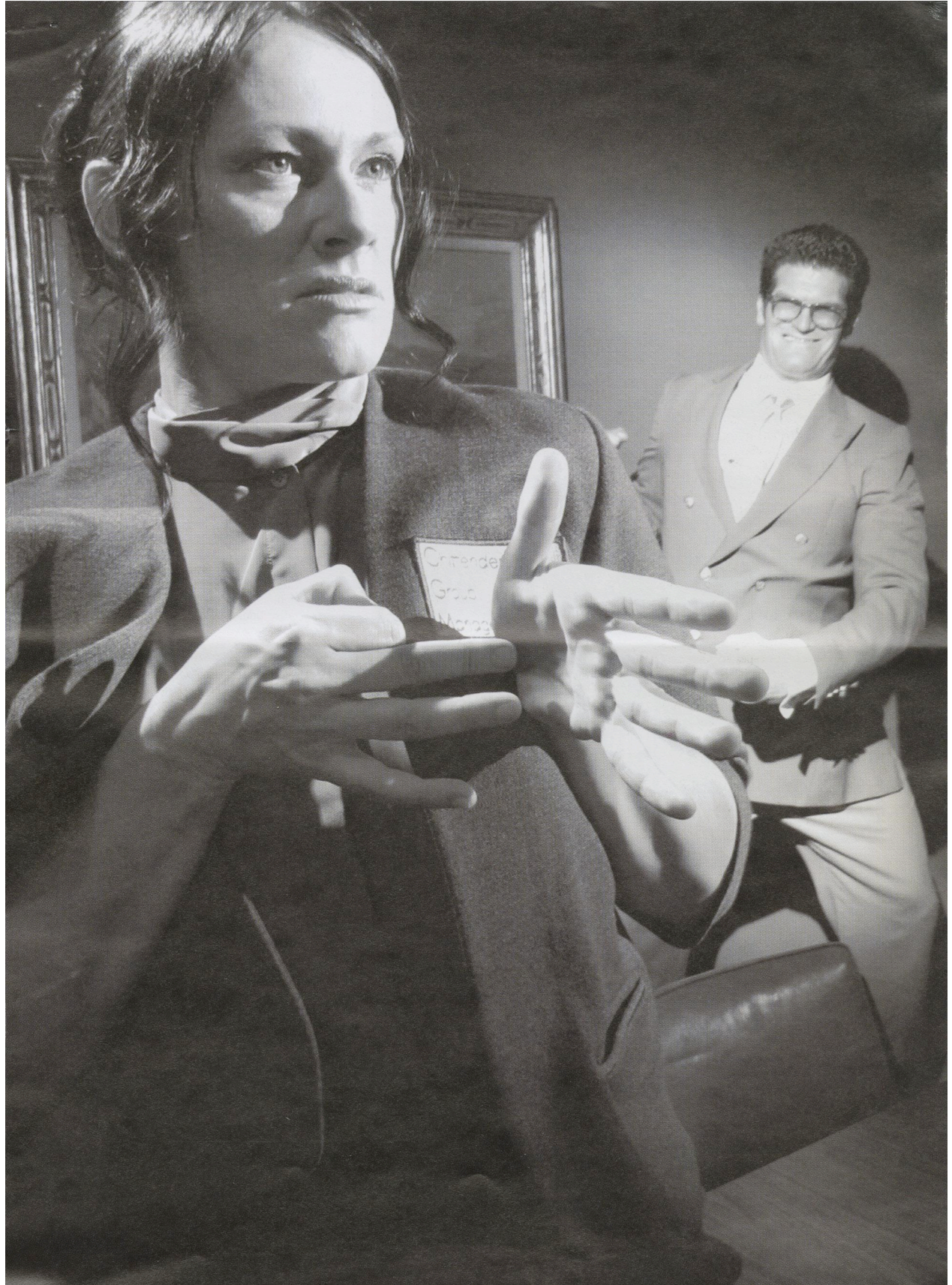
Like Yvonne Rainer's genesis of ordinary movements in her choreography for *The Mind is a Muscle* (1966–8), Sullivan strives towards a vocabulary that submerges the primacy of the link between thought and verbal language. Whereas Rainer saw her body as her 'enduring reality' in the face of the impotence she felt at seeing the horror of the Vietnam

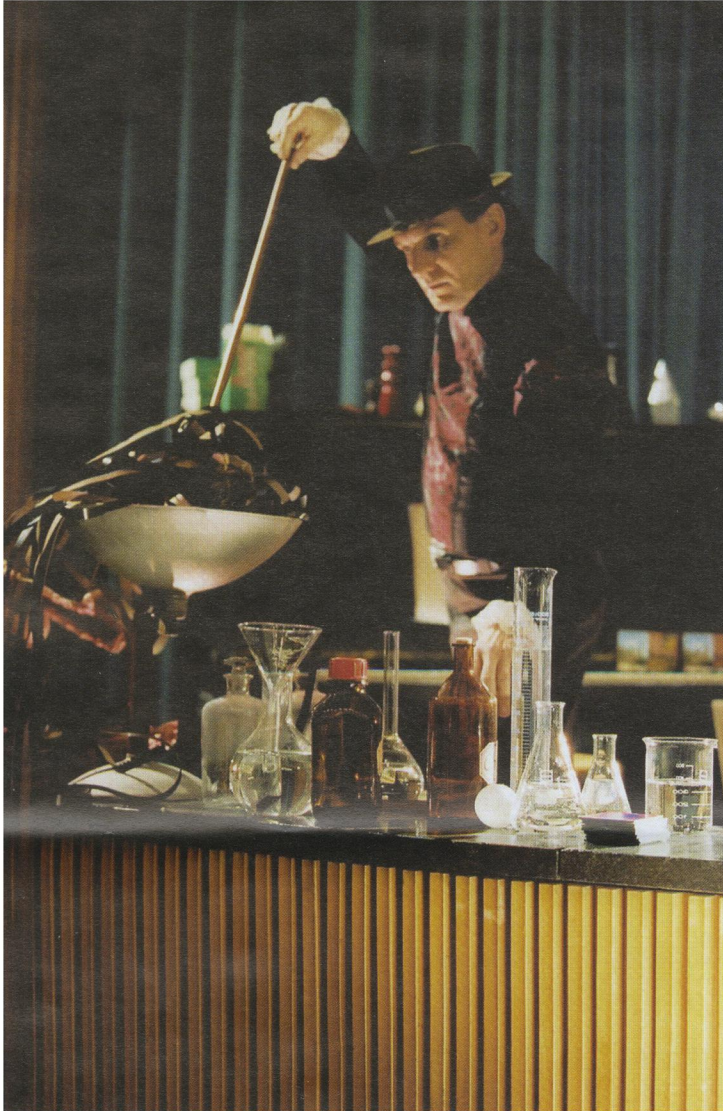
An Actor Prepares

Catherine Sullivan's work skips between historical periods and locations, connecting Baroque ideas of 'all the world as a stage' with an individual's subjectivity by *Catherine Wood*



'An Actor Prepares' p. 108
Catherine Sullivan
Les Filles of Brno: Joseph Land
(Orchestra: *Manifestation*)
2004
Performance at Yeha Grossman Center, New York
Courtesy: the artist and gallery Catherine Hooley, Brussels





*'Tis Pity
She's a
Fluxus
Whore
2003
Production
still*

War on TV, Sullivan collides the body and media to create a dissonant, productive energy. This is something she shares with Bruce Nauman's investigations of the self, testing out and recording his own repeated actions, such as *Walking with Contrapposto* (1968) or *Double No* (1988), suggesting position and gesture as simultaneously revealing of interiority and absurdly self-conscious. But whereas Nauman tests the boundaries between the self and the environment in the intimate and deliberately limited space of his studio, via the self-enclosed loop of the video medium, Sullivan mines the capacity of the same medium via its genealogical proximity to television as a geographical space in itself, examining multiple substitute subjects – actors – in multiple stage-set locations.

Sullivan takes as her starting-point what Rosalind Krauss, in discussing Auguste Rodin's sculpture, has described as the 'terror' of knowing that 'some of the most private reaches of the self could be thought of as hav-

Catherine Sullivan's dislocated sets and time periods bear the psychological imprint of channel-surfing.

ing been learned from the behaviour of others – from their gestures of pain, for example, or of love'.⁶ The abstraction at stake in her scoring method provides her with a mode of investigating group behaviour akin to the modern dance of Merce Cunningham, using such gestures – corrupted further by overtly theatrical costumes, face paint, wigs – as choreographic phrases. In colliding these strategies she mines the points of contradiction between the performance of shared language and elusive, obstinate individuality.

Sullivan's examination of patterns of the self emerges in different ways: between the

group choreography she stages for video, the live theatre pieces which are constituted by a present audience, and the multi-screen video installations through which the spectator is invited to make their own path. That these installations sometimes include props from the performances or films, as in her installation at the Kunsthalle Zurich earlier this year, where objects from *Ice Floes ...* were placed as sculptures and hung on the gallery walls alongside the video projection, complicates Sullivan's treatment of bodies and spaces further: there are two kinds of fictional spaces presented, butted up against each other. The props function as protrusions into the viewer's sense that the video contains 'fictional' space/time and the gallery space 'real' space/time, charging both with artificiality. Both the theatre pieces and the films are made to be repeated again and again.

Chris Hammonds has likened Sullivan's use of repetition in 'theatre's continual resurrection' to Gertrude Stein's 'landscape theatre'. He writes: 'Stein's stratagem was to alter the mode of perception within performance, removing the traditional structure of start, middle and end through constant deferral. Transgressing linear narrative, she sought to emphasize the spatial possibilities of theatre.'⁷ In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1974, translated into English in 1984), Michel de Certeau also suggests that narrative structures have the status of spatial structures in that they 'put places in interlaced series'. De Certeau differentiates between 'place' as a stable concept that can be plotted on a map of distributed points, and 'space' that includes 'vectors of direction, velocities and time variables'.⁸ Stories, he writes, 'transform places into spaces and spaces into places' because 'the story has distributive power and performative force (it does what it says)'.⁹ Sullivan uses stories as the basis of her choreography to initiate action as a collective ritual. But she complicates conventional narrative's directional, goal-oriented flow in order to allow to rise to the surface other, deeper patterns inscribed in individual subjectivity, seeping through and interrupting the order that both the narrative arc and her numeric scoring impose. Sullivan's work skips between historical periods and locations: for example, in *'Tis Pity She's a Fluxus Whore* (2003) she moves between John Ford's 17th-century England and 1960s' Fluxus Germany. In this sense the double status of *The Chittendens'* lighthouse as both destination and warning is emblematic of the artist's project. Sullivan recognizes the lighthouse image, as Woolf did, as a hinge to link form, function and the nature of narrative as the arbiter of action – be it collective or individual.

De Certeau concludes his chapter with the observation that the story, as it is used in ancient rites or battles, in fact clears a path for action. 'The story's first function is to authorize or more exactly to found', he writes; 'this founding is [...] the primary role of the story. [...] It creates a field that authorizes dangerous and contingent social actions.'¹⁰ *D-Pattern* and *The Chittendens* present groups of people whose movements are choreographed according to principles that fracture such clarity. The performers appear possessed rather than exhibiting self-possession, yet Sullivan is fascinated by the extent to which we can still glean some sense of character and read them as 'unified personas'. In *D-Pattern*, though the tableau that is presented is a cacophony



Ice Floes of Franz Joseph Land
2003
Production still

of jerkily moving, stuttering subjectivity, Sullivan makes visible the way that individuality inevitably surfaces as habit or tics, offering an ambiguous affirmation of the existence of some kind of static essence of being. Jacques Rancière has written of the role of the 'mimetician', using the example of the actor, as being 'a fold in the distribution of the sensible: a duplication meaning that someone is doing two things at once'.¹¹ Sullivan exaggerates this repetition of gesture to look back on the actor's guiding counterpoint – the 'real' – so that neither functions efficiently in an economy of communication, narrative or progress.

Sullivan's explorations of subjectivity always acknowledge her position in, and the dominance of, 21st-century American culture.¹² While it is possible to trace the threads of many specific stories in the work, Sullivan's method presents the body as we know it via the shallow space of television and the stop/start/fast-forward capacities of video and digital technology.¹³ Her dislocated sets and time periods bear the psychological imprint of one of the most banal aspects of contemporary popular culture – channel-surfing. Norman M. Klein has analysed 'audience culture' in relation to television in terms of the extent to which the constant interruptions of commercial breaks force it 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'; indeed, 'TV narratives flourish on Brechtian disjunction but apply it like a sedative. [Television] uses sharp contrasts regularly, but to induce reverie or to get the audience in the mood to shop'.¹⁴ Compositionally Sullivan also creates an abbreviated

rhythm of communicatory gestures, but, rather than aiming at clear plot outlines, she sets up an experiment where these emerge at the viewer's will, or else do not. Sullivan's work brings into question the actor's role as 'mimetician' by breaking down the story and reordering the expected sequence, and in her video installations inviting the mobility of the spectator's own subjectivity to determine how the work is read.

Brecht wrote of the actor: 'Aiming not to put his audience into a trance, he must not go into a trance himself. [...] His way of speaking has to be free from ecclesiastical sing-song and from all those cadences which lull the spectator so that the sense gets lost'.¹⁵ Sullivan's disruption of theatrical illusion is often labelled as 'Brechtian', but her use of rhythm actually works against the playwright's analytic mode; it does not lull. Its tempo is convulsive, staccato and dissonant, and yet appeals to a sense of ritual that might equally be related to image consumption and tribal or religious practices. Sullivan has cited references to Elias Canetti's writing about crowds, specifically his description of the ritual of the hunt and subsequent feast by 'the pack'. Canetti wrote: 'Even those who were only distant witnesses of the kill may have a claim to part of the prey. When this is the case, spectators are counted as accomplices of the deed; they share the responsibility for it and partake of its fruits'.¹⁶ Sullivan's video installations and theatre pieces agitate our awareness of our own roles as hungry consumers of culture, of global news, of stories. Where do we sit in relation to Canetti's notions of responsibility and complicity? Sullivan asks if and how this collective consumption binds us together. The disjunctions and repetitions of her choreography suggest that it does not, except in that individual and social bodies are contorted as hieroglyphic forms; as though the fractured patterns of early 20th-century Modernism, grafted onto contemporary media culture, have worked their way into our every cell.

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1 Maud Ellman in the introduction to Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse*, p. xxii, Vintage, London, 2000

2 Quoted in forthcoming catalogue published by Secession, Vienna, in association with Tate Modern, London, 2005.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1981, p. 230

7 Chris Hammond, "'Tis Pity She's a Fluxus Whore', *Untitled*, 33, London, Spring 2005, p. 10

8 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 2002, p. 115

9 Ibid, p. 115

10 Ibid, p. 125

11 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, Continuum International Publishing Group, New York & London, 2004, p. 22

12 Sullivan's development of *The Chittendens* was informed by her reading of Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions*, New York, The Macmillan Company (1899). See forthcoming Secession catalogue.

13 Note Xavier Leroi and Eszter Salamon's collaboration *Gizelle* (2001), as a contemporary interpretation of bodily movement filtered through the technological capabilities of video.

14 Norman M. Klein, 'Audience Culture and the Video Screen', *Illuminating Video, Aperture*, New York, 1991, p. 375

15 Bertolt Brecht, 'A Short Organum for the Theatre' 1948, reproduced *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, edited by John Willet, Methuen, London, 2001, p. 193

16 Elias Canetti, 'The Hunting Pack', *Crowds and Power*, The Noonday Press, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1984, p. 98