

# METRO PICTURES

Casavecchia, Barbara. "I'm Not There," *Mousse* (January 2008): 68-70.

## MOUSSE



Catherine Sullivan, *Triangle of Need*, 2007

*Today more than ever, the association of visual arts and theatre seems something of great fascination to artists, curators, and museums. Not by chance, it was celebrated by a large show at the Tate Modern in London, titled The World As A Stage. The image chosen for the poster was drawn by The Chittendens, a work of 2005 by Catherine Sullivan. Can you remember her first solo show in Italy, at Gió Marconi in Milan? The main work was Ice Floes Of Franz Joseph Land, a video-installation composed of five black and white films where a bunch of actors put on the stage a Russian drama entitled Nord-Ost and at the same time a tragic event occurred in 2002 during its performance in Moscow, i.e. the notorious attack by the Chechen terrorists. Since then, we had the impression of a complex, multi-layered work full of references especially to the history of theatre. Now that Sullivan (1968) is in the limelight—due to her current solo show at the A-Foundation in Liverpool and the upcoming one at Metro Pictures in New York—the need to decode these references is more pressing than ever.*

Last April, the Living Theatre reopened in New York's Lower East Side by re-enacting (literally, for once) its debut play, *The Brig* by Kenneth Brown, a claustrophobic parable on the brutality of military discipline. In 1963, coercion was expressed through an elementary stage mechanism like the cage, and above all through a complete accordance, even during rehearsals, with the rules established by the Guidebook for Marines. In other words, law was the Immovable Structure that the actors were required to submit to in spite of behavioral derangement, nausea, and violence. In her essay "Directing The Brig", Judith Malina, who co-founded the Living Theatre with Julian Beck, declared she had been inspired by three masters. First of all, the Russian Constructivist Mejerchol'd (1874-1940), mentor of Sergej Ejzenstejn and the inventor of Theatrical Biomechanics.



Catherine Sullivan, *The Resuscitation of Uplifting (Chittenden Lobby: Triangle Aria)*, 2005

Malina writes: "When he spoke of his theory as 'the organization and geometrization of movement, based on deep study of the human body,' he knew that something psychophysical was at stake; that the way back to the sensibilities of the spectator must be through referring again to the human body standing there trapped before him, The actor is not disembodied of his soul, but is full with it and controls it to fill out the dramatic and metaphysical construction. In *The Brig* each actor feels his total creativity when the external form of his action is so inhibited and his single repeated phrase is so limiting that (...) the performances become filled with invention and full of mystery. Each actor has his mystery and his trip." The second reference was Artaud, of whom Malina recalled the dream of a theatre where "the overlapping of images and movements will culminate, through the collusion of objects, silences, shouts, and rhythms, or in a genuinely physical language with signs, not words, as its root." And finally Piscator, of whom she had been an apprentice and especially admired his work at the Berliner Volksbühne, his experimentalism generative of chaos, his ability to transform the auditorium into an assembly hall and to make politics on stage in the same manner as his friend Bertold Brecht.



Catherine Sullivan, *Triangle of Need*, installation view, 2007

Catherine Sullivan (b. 1968, Los Angeles) studied acting at the California Institute of Arts in Valencia, and after that at the Art Center College of Design of Pasadena with Mike Kelley (the comparison with his *Extracurricular Activities* is indeed inevitable). Several times she mentioned Mejerchol'd and Piscator as her points of reference; and at the Volksbühne in Berlin she presented *Naustadt*, as well as a video-installation last December for the *Operavision* by Christian von Borries. She demands from her actors—with whom she has been working with for many years and whom she is frequently accused of treating like puppets (just like Mejerchol'd was)—to become involved with a radicality comparable to Malina's. She gives them poor yet accurate indications concerning the role—more than one interpreter for each character, and more than one character for each interpreter; actors have to condense the essence of the roles in a few stylized gestures or fragments of gestures to be repeated according to a seemingly random pattern that is in fact meticulously choreographed, and closely knit with the music by the Californian composer Sean Griffin.

For instance, the “script” for *The Chittendens* (Secession, Wien, 2005; Tate Modern, London, 2006) was a list of fourteen attitudes assigned to sixteen actors arranged along three tracks of a dynamic scale: “Minimized or maximized in terms of dramatic stakes. Reduced or expanded in physical form. Abbreviated or extended in terms of time.” But what interests Sullivan is not so much dissociation or the spectator's alienation as the actor's “disfiguration” and transformative potential: “The performers' movements are not alienating in and of themselves. It's what happens to those movements once they're in the environment of a particular regime. It is to the regime that judgment is to be directed versus judgment being directed at the individuals within it. And that's been something of a misunderstanding within the work. It's not that I want anyone to look at the actors succeeding or failing within this situation. It's more that any judgment is to be directed at the situation that asks them to behave and perform in this way. (...) A fundamental principle of the way the regime operates is by giving no explanation for itself.”



Catherine Sullivan, *Triangle of Need*, installation view, 2007

The reference is to the “behavioral regulation to which we all are subject,” that imposes self-possession as necessary. Sullivan’s theatrical video-installations and ‘demonstrations’ are labyrinths, or “multi-temporal worlds”—in Daniel Birnbaum’s words—where to find one’s way is impossible. Settings are obsolete and retro; costumes are from the nineteenth or early twentieth century; black and white prevails and an inevitable nostalgic effect arises similar to that of film archaeology. This latter is indeed a clear component of the artist’s background, and it is best expressed in *Five Economies (Big Hunt/Little Hunt)* (Hammer Museum, L.A., 2002; Renaissance Society, Chicago, 2003), a 16 mm film translated into a video-installation where five scenes from *The Miracle Worker*, *Whatever Happened To Baby Jane?*, *Persona*, *Tim*, and *Marat/Sade* are played by different actors, who constantly shift from one role to another and contrast the original interpreters by age and gender, according to five different styles from naturalism to comedy. In this case, Sullivan refers to Canetti, and elsewhere to *The Theory Of The Leisure Class* by Thorstein Veblen (1899, for *The Chittendens*) or to *Two Captains* by Veniamin Kaverin (1942, for *Ice Floes Of Franz Joseph Land*), but the plot is always aleatory. Sullivan’s latest project, a 16 mm film titled *Triangle Of Need*, first showed at the Walker Art Center in August, then moved to Liverpool and the Vizcaya Museum in Miami (during the art fair), and in February will be shown at Metro Pictures in New York, is a pastiche of references, locations, occurrences—from e-mail spamming, to the singing language of the Neanderthals, to the history of the wealthy mansion of Vizcaya that in the 1920s was the residence of an industrialist from Chicago, James Deering, who once a week used to order from a film distributor’s catalogue dozens of movies selected by genre.

Despite the jerky plot, images are crystal clear (Deleuzian crystal-images), and they stick in one’s memory. Just like the gaze of an actor the second before darkness falls inside the cinema hall. The number of contemporary artists who are dealing with theatre—complete with queue, stage, and curtain—is constantly increasing: Dan Graham & Tony Oursler (*Don’t Trust Anyone Over Thirty*, 2006), Gregor Schneider (the queue of spectators formed before the Opera in Berlin, 2007), Karen Kilimnik (the ballet *Sleeping Beauty + Friends*, 2007), Tino Seghal, Trisha Donnelly and Matthew Barney (among the many interpreters of *Il Tempo Del Postino* co-curated by Obrist and Parreno for Manchester’s International Festival), Francesco Vezzoli’s version of Pirandello’s *Right You Are (If You Think You Are)* recently presented in full regalia at the Guggenheim... Except for *Waiting For Godot* staged by Paul Chan in December for a large audience in the desolate district of Gentilly in New Orleans, it seems like we’re witnessing an unplugged development of the old model of “Let’s Entertain”: it’s all applause and empathy, *hic et nunc*. So far as this is concerned, Sullivan looks a bit less naive...