

METRO PICTURES

Micchelli, Thomas. "Catherine Sullivan's X-Ray Dreams," *Hyperallergic.com* (September 15, 2018).

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Catherine Sullivan *The Startled Faction (a sensitivity training)* 2018, anamorphic video, color/sound, 34 min., installation view, Metro Pictures, New York

Catherine Sullivan is a Chicago-based artist whose films and installations have been shown only spottily in New York, and we're the poorer for it. The last piece of hers I saw was *Triangle of Need* (2007) at Metro Pictures, and that was more than 10 years ago. (Somehow, her 2016 collaboration with the composers George Lewis and Sean Griffin, *Afterword Via Fantasia*, presented by Metro Pictures for 10 days at 83 Pitt Street, escaped my notice.)

In contrast to *Triangle of Need*, a multi-part, multi-screen epic, her new work, *The Startled Faction (a sensitivity training)* (2018), is a modest 34-minute, single-channel undertaking whose only unconventional physical feature is the partitioning of the screen into three sections, with the two outer portions angled inward like the wings of an altarpiece.

This slight variation on a standard screen, which evokes the parabolic aspect of old-fashioned Cinerama, creates an unexpectedly enveloping and theatrical atmosphere — a sensation accentuated by the artist's decision to set the screen directly on the floor and shield it from daylight with a wide black curtain.



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The screen's format also helps establish a personal connection with the viewer (underscored by the frequency with which the film's characters stare directly, and unnervingly, into the camera) — a wordless, intuitive bond that is essential to the comprehension of the piece.

Like *Triangle of Need*, the new film is an unbounded dreamscape that makes sense only if you give yourself fully over to it. As I wrote in 2008 about the earlier work:

*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.*

The Startled Faction does not plumb the chthonic depths explored by *Triangle of Need*, with its swaths of dialogue spoken in an invented Neanderthal language; instead, it offers a tumbling-together of social satire, utopian feminism, and anarchist agitprop, packed with enough incident to fill a feature film but without a shred of narrative sense.

The subtitle, *a sensitivity training*, provides the film with something that might resemble a premise, at least on this side of REM sleep. The opening scene introduces eight of the film's nine cast members, three men and five women in a mix of race, ethnicity, and age, who are apparently about to undergo a sensitivity training session at their place of employment. (A sixth woman appears later on.)



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After less than a minute of meandering dialogue meant to break the ice (however unsuccessfully), the scene abruptly switches to a wide overhead shot of three of the women dancing to the Motown fave, Shirley Ellis's recording of "The Nitty Gritty" (1963), and the story goes deliriously off the rails.

Along the way, the sensitivity sessions slip in and out of reenacted scenes derived from the 1954 film *Salt of the Earth*, an exercise in American neorealism by the blacklisted team (shades of Roy Cohn) of screenwriter Michael Wilson, director Herbert J. Biberman, and producer Paul Jarrico, recounting a strike at a New Mexico zinc mine, which pitted the Hispanic and Anglo workers against each other.

These sequences, even as they incorporate real-world social and economic strife into the film's field of vision — including the ever-potent currency of dividing the working class along racial lines to ensure the white power structure — are pushed over the edge of alienation by Lynchian mannerisms, Brechtian declamations, and decontextualized movement evoking Pina Bausch's *Tanztheater*. The jam-up is demented and exhilarating.

The gallery's press release calls *The Startled Faction* a "propositional film concerned with ambiguous labor (uncompensated work outside one's job description) [in which] the prevailing question for the nine characters in the film is whether to 'lean in' to it or resist through strategies of withdrawal, redaction and retreat." Okay, but what we really get are fluid alliances and mutating personae as unpredictable and layered as the cinematography's shifting angles and colors. (One scene, bathed in gels of red, white, and blue, could be a reference to Trump's America or perhaps to the dazzling tripartite sequence of Emil Gance's sublime, silent 1927 biopic, *Napoleon* — whose subject makes a cameo appearance in *Triangle of Need* with Empress Josephine at his side.)



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The narrative, characterological, and formal instability rocking the work creates its own reality, yes, but it also presents an X-ray of the one we think we're living in — a barely intelligible blur of facts, hearsay, wishful thinking, and willful ignorance, where personal change emerges less from a crisis of faith than an exchange of masks over a jellied core. (In *Salt of the Earth*, the Mexican-American women stage a role reversal and take their husbands' place on the picket line, facing violence and arrest, while the labor leader is painted as a hypocrite and wife abuser.)

Sullivan's gift is the ability to reach into the recesses of our crania and extract prismatic impressions of concrete concerns, in this case, xenophobia, sexism, racism, class warfare, and burgeoning authoritarianism, with our unconscious myth-making apparatus intact. These conflicts are enacted among pairs, trios, and quartets of allies and antagonists, while, in a move as noteworthy as the swapping of roles and allegiances among the players, Sullivan pays careful attention to the reactions of the secondary and tertiary characters — even those glimpsed for a moment in the corner of the screen — who, in their witnessing or avoidance of events, tell stories of their own.

The Startled Faction may not be as mind-boggling as *Triangle of Need* — how could it, given the latter's sweep and complexity, leaping with abandon among languages, locales, centuries, cultures, and styles? — but in its relative simplicity, it reveals the textures of history otherwise deluged in *Triangle*'s oceanic currents. It sits on a cusp between specificity and extravagance, research and allegory, chronicle and riff, pierced by an acuity of vision that turns our looking-glass political sphere inside-out, exposing its elemental ludicrousness as an instrument of clarity and an artifact of mystifying beauty, because that's what art does.