

METRO PICTURES

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1000 WORDS

HEINRICH VON KLEIST tells the story of a famous dancer who, praising the marionette theater, suggests that a mechanical figure could be designed to "perform a dance that neither he nor any other outstanding dancer of his time . . . could equal." For this marionette's every movement, he claims, would be more graceful than any person's—akin to that of a pendulum, whose insentient motion is determined solely by an unwavering center of gravity.

Kleist's legendary discourse comes to mind when considering Catherine Sullivan's most recent work, *The Chittendens*, 2005, whose evolution also began with a notion of the performer's "self-possession" (or lack thereof). For this group of films, the artist asked sixteen actors to execute scripted sequences of what she calls "attitudes"—behavioral cues ranging from the emotive *catatonia* and *melancholic loss* to the physical *bayonet in the back*, *golf swing*, and *speech to the senate*—and to repeat this limited vocabulary of movements precisely. Yet as Sullivan's players engage these choreographies against the backdrop of modern-day offices—the scene for a more abstract sort of control and role-playing—the actors' stutters, seizures, and spasms seem to speak more to psychosis than

standardization. (Though here one may reasonably think of Robert Longo's "Men in the Cities," 1978–83, with all its sociological implications, brought to life.)

Only in glimpses does "character" ever arise in *The Chittendens*. Certain poses are instantly recognizable from cinema (whether slapstick or period drama), but these are rapidly dissolved again in a steady stream of gestures, which are often superimposed in the same pictorial space. This sense of fleeting perspective and depth—of compositional paradox—pervades the formal elements of Sullivan's projected films: Past and present coalesce as figures appear simultaneously in different period dress (indeed, one film depicts a nineteenth-century sailing venture); the wrenched shadows of film noir gently turn into the flat color tones and decor of '70s cinema; whole scenes are set literally adrift in Sullivan's poetic dissolves, her camera seemingly moving left and right at once. At its best *The Chittendens* gives viewers the sense of standing within a kind of historical and spatial kaleidoscope—but only, as Sullivan suggests in her final words below (and much in the spirit of Kleist's dumb marionette full of grace), so that audiences lose their perspective in order to gain it.

—TIM GRIFFIN

Catherine Sullivan

TALKS ABOUT *THE CHITTENDENS*, 2005

BEFORE *THE CHITTENDENS* I had been collaborating with composer Sean Griffin on a choreographic piece called *D-Pattern*, trying to tease ambiguities out of very reductive compositional methods (reduction leading to greater opportunities for recombination and thus accumulation). We were interested in Fluxus and scoring strategies from the 1960s, and we automated the dramatic tasks of actors—physical or emotional circumstances, or "attitudes," such as *manic sincerity*—using numerical sequences combined with interpretive treatments, which would vary the execution in size or intensity. Gestures and emotions were executed in repeatable units, just as a percussionist would treat phrases of beats. Sean puts it best when he says the subsequent effect is narrative, but the actors do not embody that narrative—it passes through them in compositional relationships. Psychosocial connotations are randomly generated as, for example, one phrase of a character's attitudes encounters another, or as a phrase is repeated with a new partner, and as a perceptual history develops with the viewer. It's like a Ouija board, as Sean says, a conjectural machine spelling out something that isn't really there.

It's not easy to play an attitude such as *manic sincerity* over a fixed series of counts in a repeatable way, and *The Chittendens* began with the baggage *D-Pattern* left behind: the many problems and frustrations actors encountered in quantifying and articulating dramatic attitudes automated by numeric sequencing, without narrative motivation. In every rehearsal for *D-Pattern*, the issue of self-

control became more pronounced. Eventually a certain critical mood set in, and I began to question the introversion of the whole project, the relevance of my own interests. This is more or less where *The Chittendens* began—with a consideration of what this obsessive tabulation of dramatic content might mean when projected on to a more extroverted, poetic, historically loaded sphere of social ideals.

The notion of "self-possession" has always interested me. And here it emerged again, along with some thoughts about determinism—having your future handed to you versus the moral value of "free will," something which is particularly American, particularly "now," and particularly conflated with economic expansion. This was around the time of Bush's reelection and, drawing a very heavy, negative inspiration from this event, I started reading Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class*. Veblen takes up questions of self-possession as a kind of national pathology conditioned by economic interests and the prioritization of exploit—the act of putting one's prowess in evidence, controlling both natural phenomena and animate things, whether oneself or other men. In an industrial society—which Veblen finds corrupt—the assimilation, emulation, and display of one's acquisition and ownership is considered noble.

This idea of exploit struck me again a few months later: I was driving in Phoenix, Arizona, and passed a nondescript building with a fading signpost depicting a lighthouse and a tall, rigged sailing ship, a logo for the Chittendens, a local insurance agency. Maritime imagery is ubiquitous in American business

culture—the lighthouse, an emblem of the mythologized soul of financial security—and the Chittendens design seemed to affirm precisely the notion of exploit described by Veblen. In fact, its implied fiscal self-possession generated a parallel to the struggle of the performers and their choreographies. I imagined the Chittendens as a clan or secret society of pre-Microsoft middle managers, and began to develop a *mise-en-scène* conflating Veblen and the insurance agency's maritime iconography.

I always look for settings that will in themselves extend the effects of the work. There is no "production design." The furniture or interiors may be rearranged, but it all comes with the location. The hope is that neither the historical significance of a location nor the stylized theatrical action staged there is absorbed into the other, making a pure fiction. In the best cases, character, action, and setting animate one another toward an effusion of meaning. This is the narrative "progress" of the work. And this is actually when I feel the work is most successful, somehow—when it serves as an occasion to present the desires of others, represented by aspects of the location and its decor, the individuals who perform it, and the cultural regimes that condition these performances.

For *The Chittendens* I began to look for offices: late capitalism as I have experienced it, the ersatz financial milieu of upper, middle, lower-middle, junior, and lower management. I finally settled on a mid-'60s office building in Chicago, where several rooms were under construction or contained office



Top; Catherine Sullivan, *The Chittendens (Misfire #4, Cinematically Distant)*, 2005, color photograph, 11 x 48 1/2". Bottom; Catherine Sullivan, *The Chittendens (Misfire #11, Playing Faces)*, 2005, color photograph, 11 x 48 1/2".





This page: Catherine Sullivan, *The Chittendens*, 2005. Installation view. Both screens: *Chittendens Office (Morbid Naturalism)*, 2005. Opposite page, top left: Catherine Sullivan, *The Chittendens (Chittenden Screen Tests, Second Set: Virtuous Woman/Mean Showgirl Lynching Retreat)*, 2005, still from a black-and-white and color film in 16 mm, approx. 97 minutes. Carolyn Shoemaker. Top right: Catherine Sullivan, *The Chittendens (Chittenden Screen Tests, The Predatory Barbarian)*, 2005, still from a black-and-white and color film in 16 mm, approx. 97 minutes. Andrzej Krukowski. Middle: Catherine Sullivan, *The Chittendens (Poverty Island)*, 2005, stills from a black-and-white and color film in 16 mm, approx. 97 minutes. Juliusz Dobiesz, Michael Garvey, and Circus-Szalewski. Bottom left: Catherine Sullivan, *The Chittendens (Morbid Naturalism)*, 2005, still from a black-and-white and color film in 16 mm, approx. 97 minutes. Andrzej Krukowski, Stephanie Hecht, and Nadja Stuebiger. Bottom right: Catherine Sullivan, *The Chittendens (Peaceable Savage and Marine)*, 2005, still from a black-and-white and color film in 16 mm, approx. 97 minutes. Gary D'Amico and Nicolai Todorov.

I wanted to create the effect of the camera in flight, as if it passes through the rooms only long enough for a glimpse of the most hysterical aspects of each interaction.

furniture, leftover files, knickknacks, and hundreds of other surpluses of closed-out or relocated businesses. Empty offices and a grand oak-paneled boardroom were our primary locations. A real epiphany happened when I found an abandoned lighthouse on a small island off the Wisconsin coast, ironically named Poverty Island. Built in 1875, this lighthouse guided vessels loaded with ore to the steel mills of the Great Lakes during the maritime commerce boom of the mid-nineteenth century. Drawn from various nineteenth- and twentieth-century archetypes—including Veblen's leisure-class financier and peaceable savage—the costumes are meant to provide a kind of “loose cover” for the performers. These costumes could justify a performer's being someplace in dramatic terms, but would never reconcile with what exactly he or she would do there.

Presented in anywhere from five to six projections, depending on the venue, the piece works the performance of the numeric choreographies through a spectrum of scenes, with different stylistic approaches and stagings for the camera. The first component, *Chittendens Office (Morbid Naturalism)*, takes place in the maze of small offices. An unmoti-

vated camera moves repeatedly through a waiting room, pantry, bathroom, conference room, and executive office, generating an endless mutation of narrative depending on the status of the room, who is present, and the effects of their actions. The strength of the contrast of black-and-white values within the images—which are often dissolved over each other—also makes it very difficult to tell who is where and with whom, and exactly how the rooms open and close on to one another. I wanted to create the effect of the camera in flight, as if it passes through the rooms only long enough for a glimpse of the most hysterical aspects of each interaction—entering each room almost accidentally, and leaving because the activity has gotten too intense. I wanted to create a sense that the camera witnesses the office “breeding” this heightened behavior.

The *Chittenden Screen Tests* were filmed in an executive boardroom. These scenes present one score per actor in different costumes, filmed in two takes, one in black-and-white, the other in color. 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. A third component of the piece, *The Resuscitation of Uplifting*, takes place in rooms with a bad vibe of liquidation, eviction, and foreclosure. These scenes are shot in a fairly static manner, and Sean's music is used to animate narrative projections into the choreographies (again, it's the Ouija phenomena), spelling out something that isn't really there. And finally, there is a series of scenes shot at the Poverty Island lighthouse. These involve a voyage to the island with a Captain Bligh-esque figure and two “deckhands” costumed for work on a modern cruise ship. The sequence features inspirational views of the abandoned lighthouse, the deckhands at “work,” and the captain's melancholy over the failure of the resuscitation of the metaphor of the lighthouse—the voyage's primary aim. While *The Chittendens* draws together many marks of the past, it should provide a way of looking at a mismanaged, overly idealized, and dangerously nostalgic political present. □

After appearing last year at the Secession, Vienna, “The Chittendens” was featured this winter at Metro Pictures, New York, and is currently on view at Galerie Catherine Bastide, Brussels, and Tate Modern, London, through March 4 and March 5 respectively.

