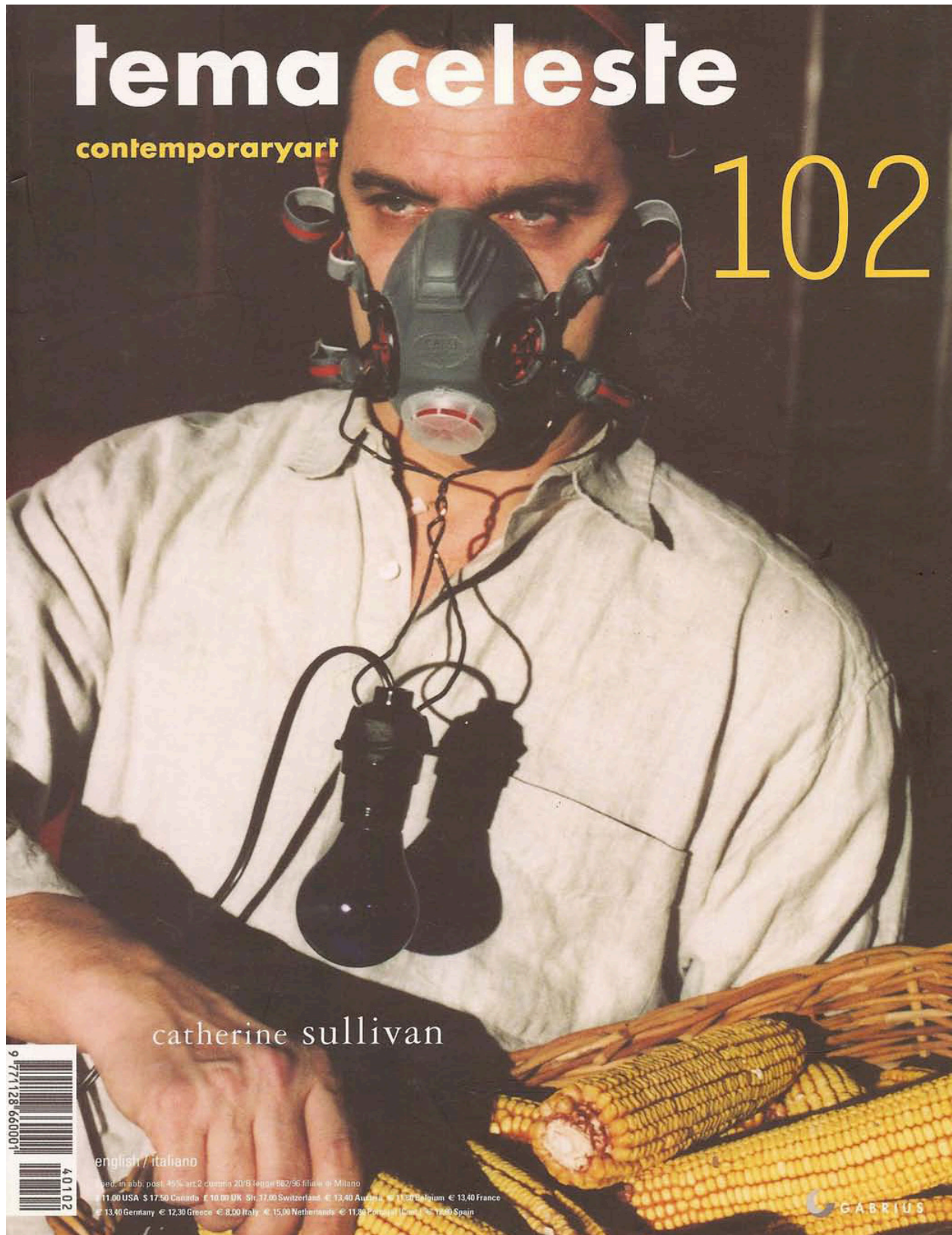


# METRO PICTURES

Jana, Reena. "The Ambiguity of Vision," *Tema Celeste* (March/April 2004): cover, 52-57.



# the ambiguity of vision

reena jana

In the work of Catherine Sullivan the boundary between real life and representation is uncertain.

One of the more disturbing international news reports in recent years was the violent October 2002 siege of a Moscow theater, executed by more than forty Chechen rebels who held an estimated 700 audience members captive before Russian special force troops stormed in and gassed the building to overthrow the terrorists and rescue the hostages. Reports stated that the

theatergoers were uncertain as to whether or not the attack was part of the production until it was too late, when shots began to be fired, wounding and killing some audience members. A similar sense of disorienting confusion can ensue upon witnessing the mysterious yet familiar video by Catherine Sullivan. Unveiled at the latest installment of the Biennale de Lyon, her most recent piece, *Ice Floes of Franz Joseph Land* (2003), used the Moscow theater siege as a point of departure. In this work, Sullivan references the play performed during the attack, *Nord Ost* which was based on the classic nationalistic Russian novel *Two Captains*—a true adventure story (with a romantic plot thrown in) about a search for a pilot and his crew lost in the Russian Arctic. Consisting of five screens, *Ice Floes* presents actors performing pantomimed movements (digging or starving for example) from scenes based on the narrative of the play and the novel. Looking at this work while aware of its references, one cannot ignore the sad irony of the plot's patriotic nature as it had unfolded onstage in Moscow on that fateful day in 2002: the performance soon morphed into a real-life drama in which the audience became actual protagonists of Russian history and thus joined the characters portrayed in *Nord Ost*. Sullivan suggests that both stories—the play novel that romanticized Russia's expansion and growth as a nation, and the violent narrative being “written and acted out” by the Chechen rebels—were fueled by deep sentiments of idealism, though very different and opposing brands of idealism. In this gripping piece with its political undertones, Sullivan effectively and subtly explores how daily life can evolve into theater drama, and sometimes vice versa.

*Ice Floes* therefore takes Sullivan—known primarily for her appropriation of scenes from an eclectic array of classic movies—into new territory. Based in Los Angeles and formally trained as an actress, Sullivan has the true Hollywood background to adapt the film world into contemporary art. Like Matthew Barney, she is prone to concocting mysterious cinematic drama, yet, as Cindy Sherman did effectively in her early film stills, Sullivan often does not use color when presenting her over-the-top



◀ Catherine Sullivan *Ice Floes of Franz Joseph Land*, 2003, production still / still da produzione.

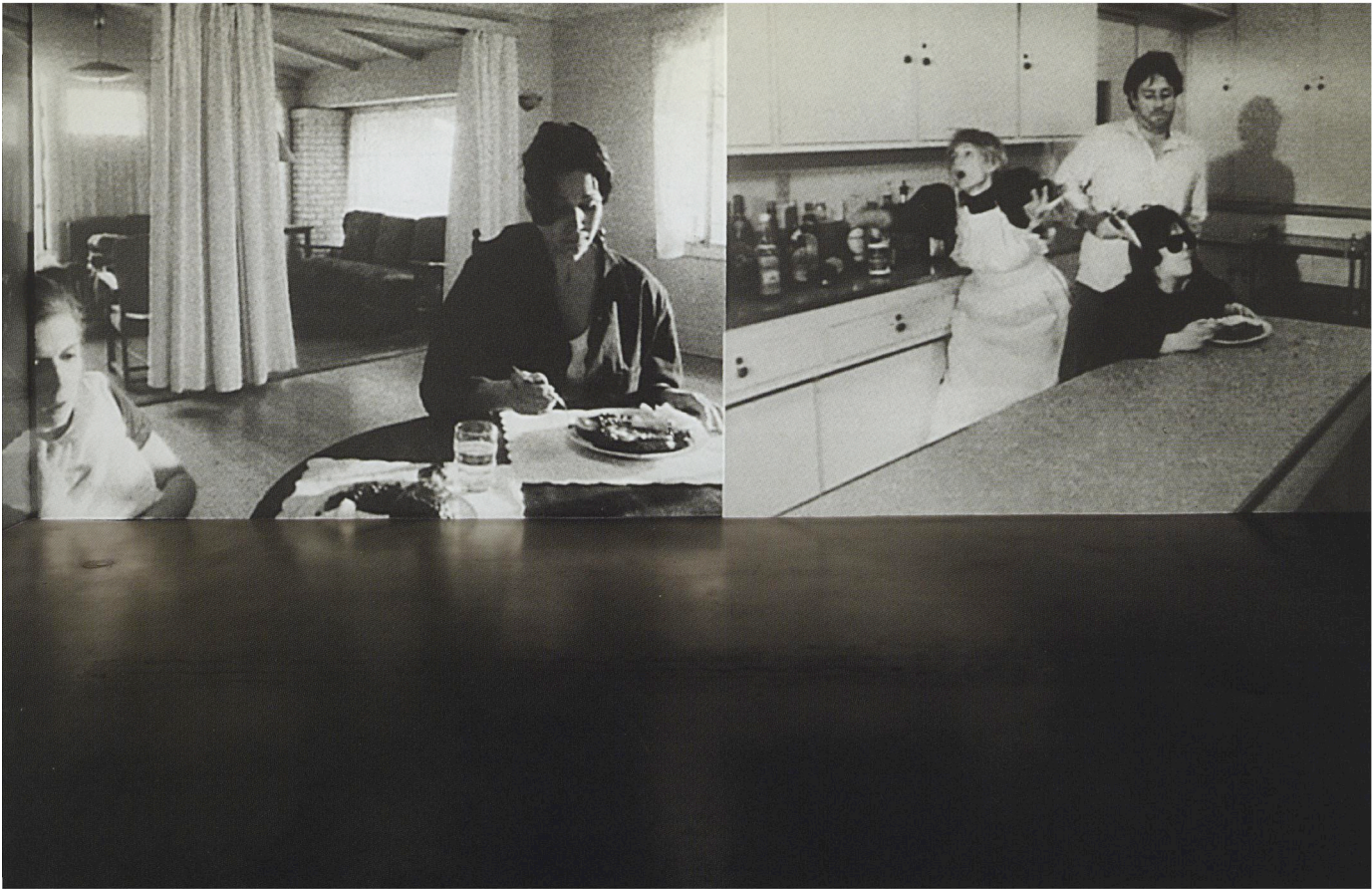
▼ Catherine Sullivan *Tis Pity She's a Fluxus Whore*, 2003 (Koepke Action), production still / still da produzione.



theatricality. In her black-and-white pieces, such as her best-known and most misunderstood work, *Five Economies*. *Big Hunt/Little Hunt* (2002) Sullivan places emphasis on the actors themselves rather than on mind-boggling costumes or eye-popping locations (her unadorned stages and simple costumes contrast with Barney's baroque wardrobes and settings which have included the Guggenheim Museum's gorgeous rotunda and

spiraling floors). *Big Hunt* the central work in *Five Economies* is an ambitious yet silent five-screen projection of fifteen-minute scenes that overwhelms the space in which it is shown. The lack of music or dialogue forces the viewer to concentrate on each action that the performers undertake, just as one might focus on every move made by Charlie Chaplin.

The scenes featured in *Five Economies* seem campy at first, then



▲ Catherine Sullivan *Big Hunt*, 2002. Installation view at / Veduta dell'installazione presso Metro Pictures Gallery, New York, 2003.

▶ Catherine Sullivan *Gold Standard (hysterical, melancholic, degraded, refined)*, 2001. Installation view / Veduta dell'installazione.

creepy, and then, after repeated viewings, campy once again. In *Big Hunt* we see footage of actors of different genders and races as they take turns enacting the non-fictional role of Helen Keller, as well as that of her selfless caretaker, creating performances that meticulously reproduce segments of the 1962 film *The Miracle Worker* starring Patty Duke and Anne Bancroft or of an actor dressed in little-girl drag playing Bette Davis' demented character in *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* These are challenging scenes for actor and audience alike, as they involve a willing suspension of disbelief on both sides. Last year, "The New York Times" skewered Sullivan's movies as "a lot of empty overacting" and "monotonous chaos," thus missing the deliberateness of the exaggerated drama, which is not intended to be taken either too seriously or too casually. Instead, Sullivan is developing a sort of body-based Esperanto—a physical language that defies any national or international references or boundaries. Her work echoes classic cinema (again, think of Charlie Chaplin's brilliant presence onscreen), Hollywood's purest roots. Seen in this context Sullivan succeeds in communicating the undeniable power of an actor's corporeal portrayal of a character, especially in an era of blockbuster films with lavish visual effects, which

render great performances nearly irrelevant.

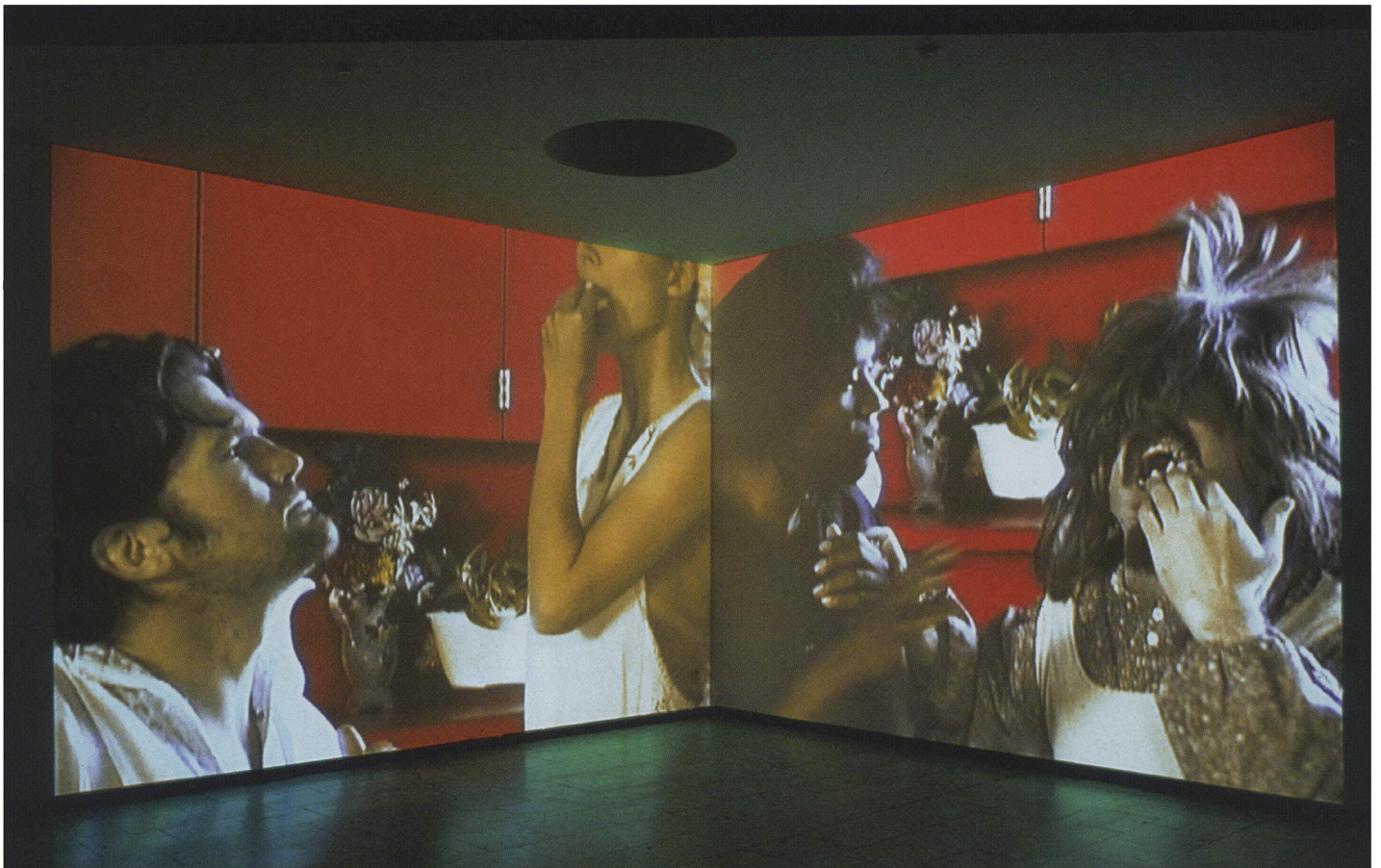
In her more recent works Sullivan has been veering away from Hollywood and more toward drawing a parallel between true-to-life incidents and Fluxus absurdity. Now with a more "controversial" angle she has been chosen by the Whitney Biennial's triumvirate of curators for inclusion in the exhibition. In addition to the piece that made its debut in Lyon, Sullivan's April 2003 exhibition at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum in Hartford, Connecticut featured Sullivan's exploration of what she has called "the social nature of the theatrical gesture" by dramatizing real events. Created especially for the museum, the video addressed the public outrage that occurred in Hartford in 1943 when the Wadsworth produced the arguably unchaste seventeenth century English drama by John Ford, *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*—a play which chronicled the tragic love affair between a woman and her brother. Entitled *'Tis Pity She's a Fluxus Whore* Sullivan's piece presented the artist's reenactment of the 1943 production, with some scenes shot in Aachen, Germany—the site of a 1964 Fluxus festival—alongside a recreation of German Fluxus happenings, some of which were acted out in Hartford. It's up to the viewer to decide if the performances are equally

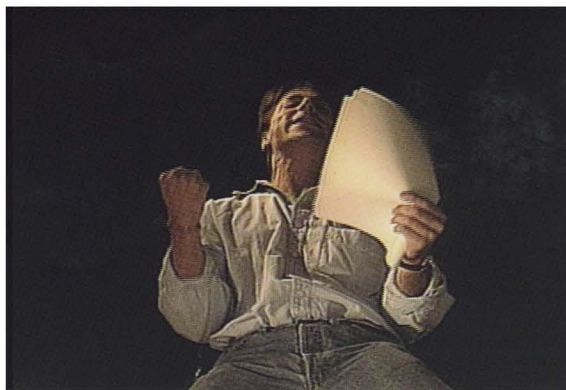
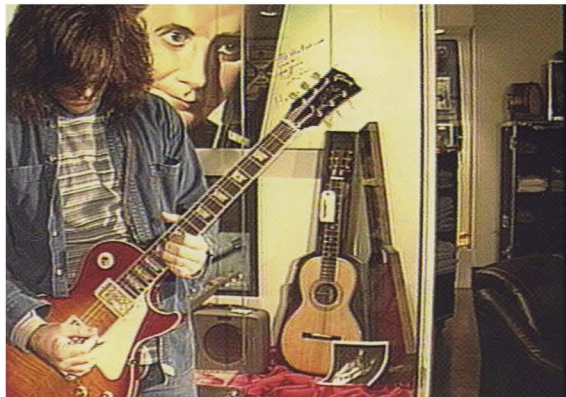
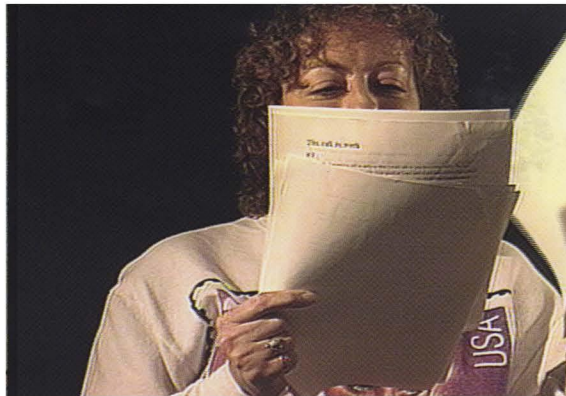
silly or serious. Sullivan seems to have made up her mind that they are both.

Although her work is often described as having a primary focus on the techniques of acting and directing, Sullivan ultimately seems to suggest that any performance—whether it be by a militant group, actor, or Fluxus artist—remains forever malleable not only in the body of the actor, in the hands of the editor, or the mind of the director, but also in the eye of the beholder. Referencing both reality and fantasy, Sullivan's perplexing, disturbing imagery offers up ambiguity where it is needed, prodding her viewers to determine if something that is seen is also to be believed.

Catherine Sullivan was born in 1968 in Los Angeles, where she lives and works.

Photo Credit: the artist and Metro Pictures Gallery, New York.





• Catherine Sullivan *Unspoken Evil III*, 1996-2001 stills.



**Catherine Sullivan** *Little Hunt*, 2003, stills.