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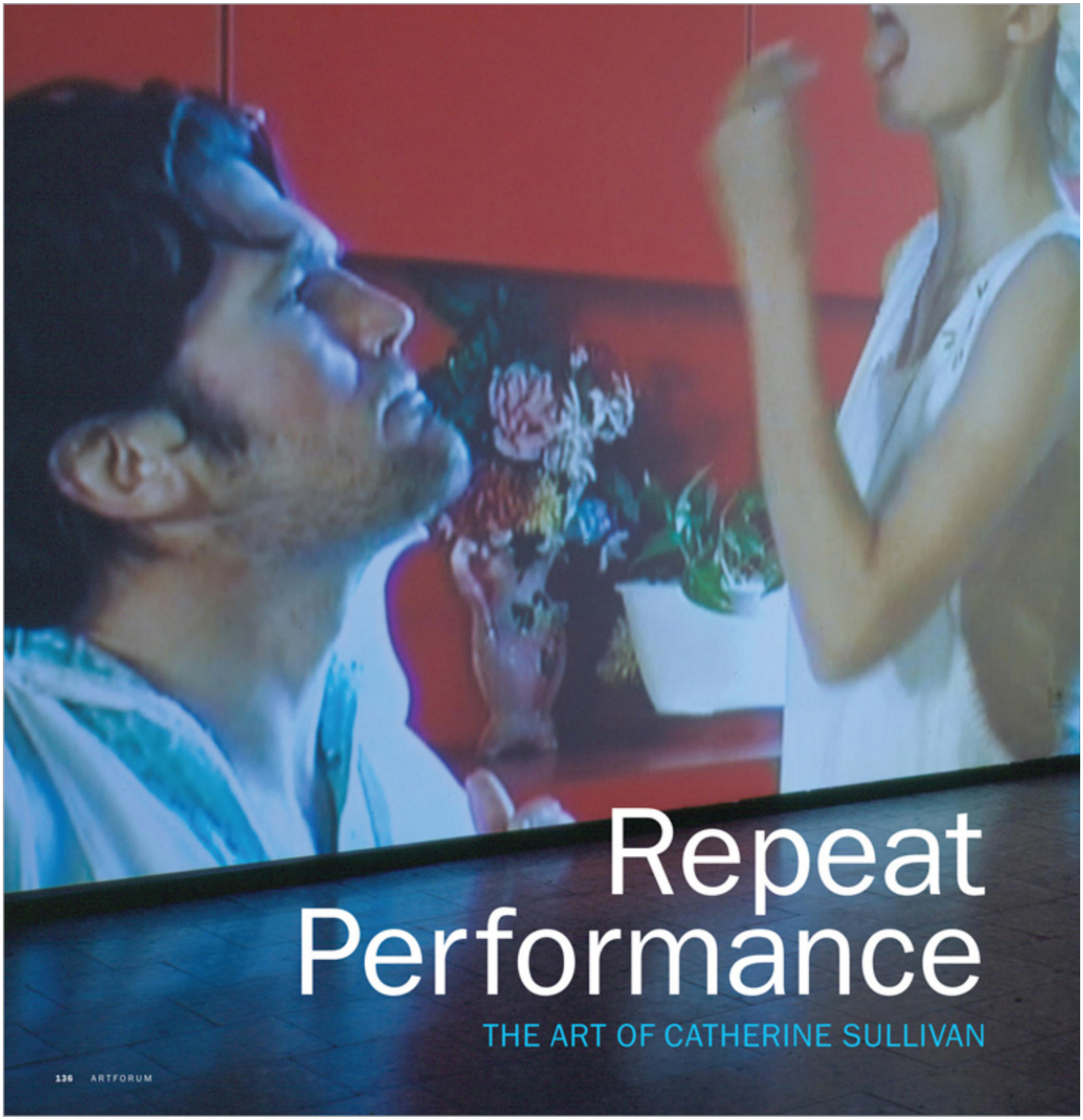
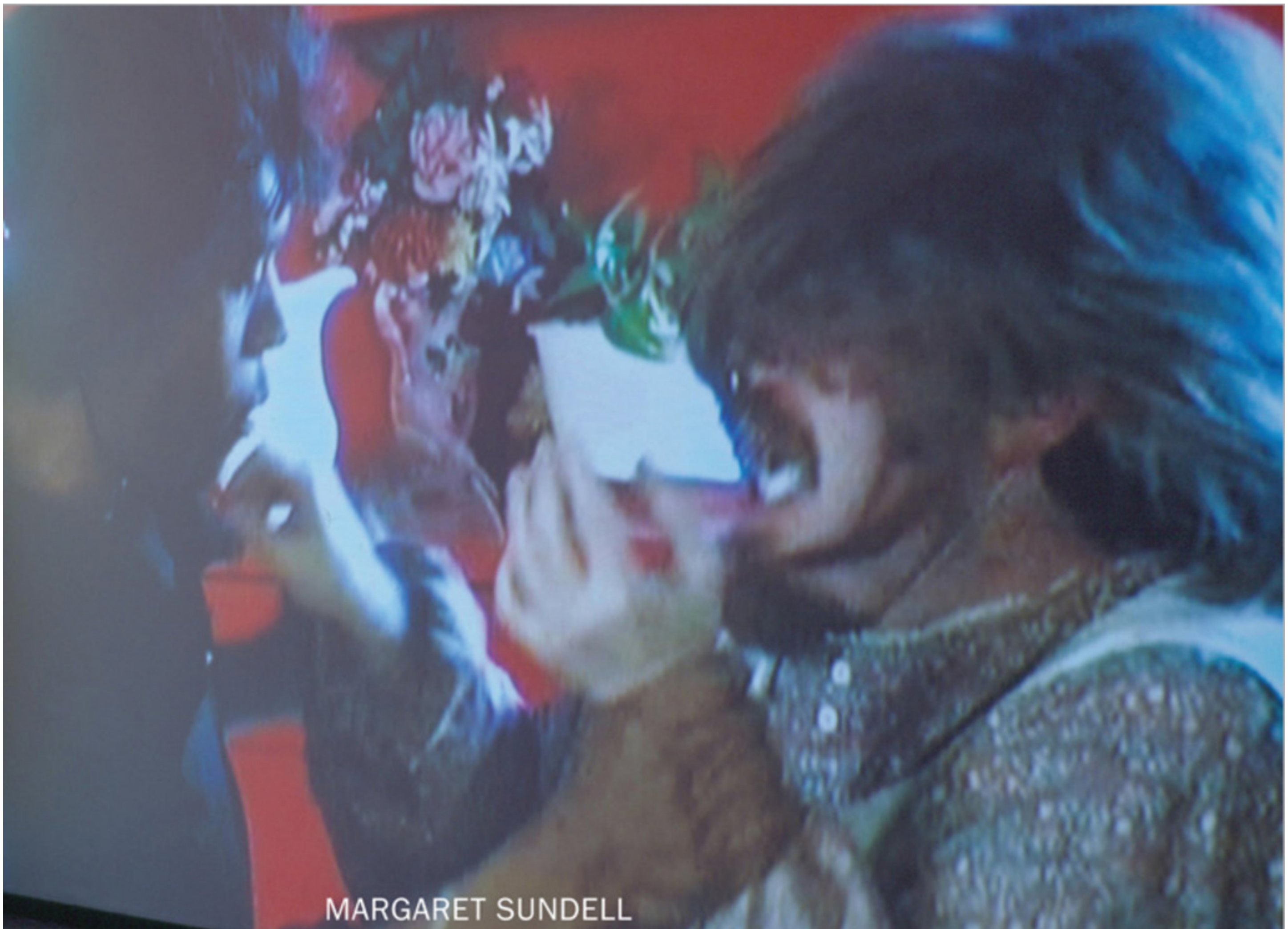


Repeat Performance

THE ART OF CATHERINE SULLIVAN



MARGARET SUNDELL

"You should not drink from the dish, but with a spoon as is proper." So reads a line from a fifteenth-century German book of manners, as cited by Norbert Elias in his classic sociological study *The Civilizing Process.* But if the spoon figures relatively early in etiquette literature, its use was not widely adopted until the mid-sixteenth century and, even then, only for eating from a communal bowl. The spoon (and the forces of civilization that it represents) comes late as well into the life of Helen Keller, a pivotal figure in the work of Los Angeles–based artist Catherine Sullivan. Keller learned mealtime conduct not from a text but from her teacher, Annie Sullivan, who placed a spoon in the hand of her deaf, blind, and unruly pupil and repeatedly and forcefully guided it from plate to mouth. This dramatic encounter and others like it are the raw material from which Sullivan creates the hybrid of video and performance art that has gained her increasing recognition since her show at the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago last year.

Taking up the story of Keller and her teacher, Sullivan turns to its famous enactment by Patty Duke and Anne Bancroft, both onstage and on-screen, in William Gibson's *The Miracle Worker*

(1962)—not a surprising choice, perhaps, given that the thirty-four-year-old artist received formal training as an actress before studying with Mike Kelley at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California. In its first incarnation in Sullivan's work, *Gold Standard (hysteric, melancholic, degraded, refined)*, 2001, two variations on the scene unfold on adjacent video projections, each featuring two pairs of actors seated at the same obviously modern but generic faux-wood table. Sullivan's performers appear in everyday attire (in theater parlance, "street clothes"). The Helens also sport white pinafores modeled after the one worn by Patty Duke. Sullivan's rendition takes further liberties: On the right-hand screen, a black woman plays Annie, while, in a bit of even more unlikely casting, a wigged and mustachioed man assumes the role of Helen. The couple move through their violent paces: Helen kicks and flails, shoves food into her mouth with her hands, and spits it out in her teacher's face; Annie blocks Helen's attempts at flight, pushes her back into her chair, and forces her, again and again, to grasp the spoon. In comparing this Annie and Helen with their Oscar-winning counterparts, one notices how precisely they mimic the movements of Bancroft and Duke. But, as even this written recounting reveals, with its use of the feminine pronoun to designate a male performer, a significant slippage occurs. The distance between actor and role generated by Sullivan's decontextualization and miscasting of *The Miracle Worker*'s "spoon" scene widens into an unbridgeable gap between action and affect on the screen to the left. There, a male Annie instructs a female but fully adult Helen, whose gestures of resistance and rebellion have been translated into a series of stylized movements reminiscent of postmodern task dance. The actions displayed on each screen, although in some sense the "same," are slightly out of sync—reinforcing the overall impression of repetition gone awry.

Kelley's influence, along with that of his sometime collaborator Paul McCarthy, is evident in Sullivan's mining of popular culture for pointedly idiosyncratic sources (this is, after all, Helen Keller, not Marilyn Monroe) that are vaguely familiar but potentially unrecognizable and at the same time marked by physical violence and psychic regression. In *Gold Standard*, these latter traits are simultaneously underscored and rendered strangely numb through their fragmentation, dislocation, and repeated appearances in varying guises. Sullivan's use of such strategies to emphasize the distinction between a performer and the part he or she plays also raises the specter of a second acknowledged influence, Bertolt Brecht. In undermining the fusion of actor and role, which both traditional fourth-wall theater and Hollywood cinema seek to perpetuate, the German playwright-director aimed to demonstrate that his characters' responses to a given situation were the product of social conditioning and historical circumstance.

While Sullivan similarly extricates her characters from their imbrication within a seamless narrative, her work departs from Brecht's epic theater in a significant way. For example, in one of her most recent projects, *'Tis Pity She's a Fluxus Whore*, 2003, excerpts from a 1943 production of John Ford's Jacobean drama at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Connecticut and a 1964 Fluxus performance festival at the Technical Academy in Aachen, Germany, are ripped from their original contexts and juxtaposed. On side-by-side projections, the same actor re-creates Wadsworth's then-director "Chick" Austin's star turn as Ford's protagonist on one screen and a host of Fluxus artists on the other. Although Sullivan's work was filmed in the very theaters where the original productions had been mounted, tellingly the relationship of action to site is reversed: The Fluxus segments occur in the Avery Memorial Theater in Hartford, while the Ford play is performed at Aachen's Audimax. In Sullivan's hands, these seemingly Brechtian acts of fissure result not in a heightened awareness of historical forces but in the loosening of her characters from the temporal flow of history. Entirely immersed in the moment of performance, the actors appear to inhabit a kind of pure present tense. But if history is nowhere to be found in Sullivan's art, repetition is everywhere—from the double screens used in *Gold Standard* and *'Tis Pity She's a Fluxus Whore* to those works' restaging of prior performances and representation of live action in the form of video documentation.

Sullivan's work is often discussed in modernist terms, as an elaboration on the language of theater that locates the medium's essence in the actor's expressive body. This is certainly the case with *Five Economies (big hunt, little hunt)*, 2002, Sullivan's most ambitious project to date, which takes its inspiration from Elias Canetti's *Crowds and Power*—a text that traces contemporary manifestations of power back to the dual origins of humans as both hunter and prey. The two-part installation, composed of separate video works titled *big hunt* and *little hunt*, traveled to the UCLA Hammer Museum in Los Angeles and to Metro Pictures in New York after appearing in Chicago. In *big hunt*, Keller's acquisition of the spoon appears again, this time as one of five tasks culled from disparate sources. Sullivan drew one task each from *The Miracle Worker* and *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* and one from *Persona*, *Tim*, and *Marat/Sade* collectively. The remaining two tasks came from the real-life story of Birdie Jo Hoaks, a twenty-five-year-old woman who disguised herself as a prepubescent boy in order to collect welfare from the social-services system in Utah, and the conventions of traditional Irish wake amusements—physically rough, at times cruel games that were played at wakes before being banned by the Catholic Church in the seventeenth century. From each of the sources, Sullivan also distilled a

Previous spread: **Catherine Sullivan, *Gold Standard (hysteric, melancholic, degraded, refined)*, 2001.** Installation view, Galerie Christian Nagel, Cologne, 2001. Photo: Simon Vogel. Inset: **Catherine Sullivan, *Five Economies (big hunt)*, 2002,** still from a black-and-white video, 22 minutes. This page, from top: **Catherine Sullivan, *Five Economies (big hunt)*, 2002,** two stills from a black-and-white video, 22 minutes. **Catherine Sullivan, *'Tis Pity She's a Fluxus Whore*, 2003.** Two production stills. Opposite page, from top: **Catherine Sullivan, *Five Economies (little hunt)*, 2002,** three stills from a color video, 15 minutes. **Catherine Sullivan, *Five Economies (big hunt)*, 2002,** two stills from a black-and-white video, 22 minutes.

single stylistic logic, five in all—ranging from subdued naturalism to broad slapstick, which she then applied to all five tasks. Certainly, an element of formalism is at play in Sullivan's codification of the stylistic principles driving various theatrical genres, an echo of Vsevolod Meyerhold's early-twentieth-century effort to establish a "grammar" of acting rooted in physical gesture. Still, there is something counterintuitive about applying a reductive modernist logic to work so deeply engaged with transformation, which, by its very nature, defies categorization.

As Sullivan explains of *big hunt* in a catalogue interview with UCLA Hammer Museum curator Russell Ferguson, "The actor's task is to be transformed by the affectations that have currency within a given stylistic economy." For Sullivan, this capacity for transformation is key. Indeed, even the dramas that Sullivan has selected involve a metamorphosis of some sort, from Birdie Jo's failed bid to join the welfare rolls by altering her appearance to Baby Jane's descent from child star to deranged persecutor of her sister Blanche. Transformation also plays a pivotal role for Canetti, as a means of both pursuing prey and avoiding capture. Over his broad, quasi-anthropological schema, Sullivan layers a second, specifically theatrical notion of transformation inspired by a former teacher's description of an actor's approach to a physically or emotionally demanding lead role as "big-game hunting." What in fact happens when an actor succeeds in the "hunt"? Fame and glory, to be sure, and perhaps the offer of better pay or more challenging parts to play. But these are only residual gains. In the moment of triumph, an exchange occurs—between two realms that might be termed, as in Gilles Deleuze's formulation, the actual and the virtual. "The actor," he writes in *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, "is bracketed with his public role: he makes the virtual image of the role actual, so that the role becomes visible and luminous." In that same instance, the actor's actuality (his or her bodily presence and idiosyncratic gestures) assumes a shadowy condition that one normally associates with unreality. Deleuze christens this coming together—or the crystallization—of the actual and the virtual the "crystal-image."

If the term "image" suggests something static or fixed, this could not be further from the truth; rather, the actual and virtual exist in a state of continual exchange. For Deleuze, the emergence in postwar cinema of "time-images," such as the "crystal-image," signals a radical shift: the ascendance of time over movement. No longer subordinated to movement's unfolding, time is unmoored from the empirical succession of past-present-future and becomes "out of joint." The result is time in a pure and unmediated state. Instead of considering *Five Economies* as a belated version of modernist medium-specificity, one might view Sullivan's interplay of doubles and her work's strangely suspended temporality in Deleuzian terms. On a sprawling multiuse soundstage containing various generic-looking sets (sunroom, basketball court, proscenium stage), a group of performers enact the various possibilities of Sullivan's system: twenty-five permutations derived from applying each of the five styles to the five different tasks (Annie and Helen in Birdie Jo Hoaks style, Charlotte Corday in *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* style, and so on). In five side-by-side, silent, black-and-white, twenty-two-minute video loops, actions and styles compete, momentarily coalesce, break apart, and then repeat, never moving toward resolution.

The smaller-scale companion piece, *little hunt*, is similarly mysterious and hypnotic, and the organic relationship between action and time is similarly askew. Here, a heavyset male, trained in ballroom dancing, and an athletic female postmodern dancer navigate a tennis court littered with props from *Les Misérables*. During the course of the fifteen-minute video, the scene abruptly shifts from night to day and back again, as if the passage of time and the performance of action were taking place in two different dimensions. All the while, the dancers remain in self-absorbed isolation, interacting not with each other but with the objects they encounter, which they attempt to assimilate into the distinct vocabularies of their respective dance techniques (he sashays around a coffin; she windmills a shotgun in her outstretched arm). At first, Sullivan's rationale for pairing *little hunt* with its black-and-white pendant seems almost as inscrutable as the works themselves. Aside from their shared status as videos documenting performances that are physically stylized and temporally disjointed, *little hunt* and *big hunt* appear largely unrelated. What links them, however, is the demand Sullivan places on her performers to repeatedly transform themselves in order to accommodate a shifting set of external impositions (in the case of *big hunt*, the stylistic variations; in *little hunt*, the props).

To return to the example of the spoon, the implement, as stated by Canetti, who also took an interest in its use, is a direct descendant of the hand. But ultimately Sullivan's art seems concerned less with an analytic reduction of theater to its underlying principles (to the point, one might say, at which the spoon's origin in the hand is revealed) than with the illumination of a foundational indeterminacy that allows substitution to occur. It is at precisely this moment that Sullivan poises her practice—when the hand endlessly becomes the spoon and the spoon forever the hand. □

Margaret Sundell is art editor of *Time Out New York* and a frequent contributor to *Artforum*.

In Sullivan's *Five Economies*, actions and styles compete, momentarily coalesce, break apart, and then repeat, never moving toward resolution.