

# METRO PICTURES

Pontégnie, Anne. "Catherine Sullivan: Towards Disembodiment," *artpress* (December 2005): 31-35.

**art**  
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## *Catherine Sullivan: Towards Disembodiment*

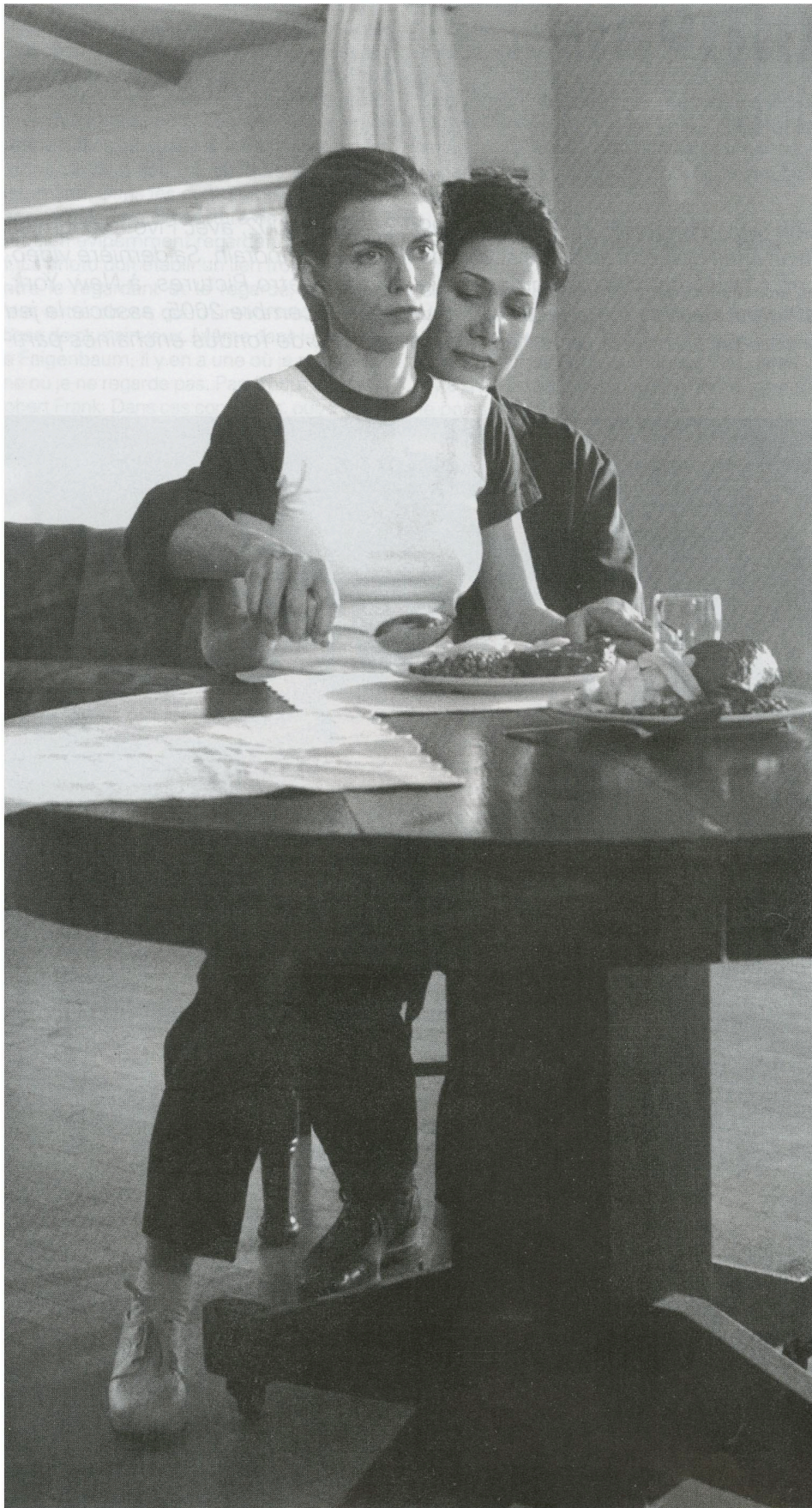
*Although her artistic development really began in the mid-1990s, it was in 2002, with Five Economies (Big Hunt/Little Hunt), that Catherine Sullivan really arrived on the contemporary art scene. Her latest video, The Chittendens, presented last summer at the Wiener Secession and then at Metro Pictures, New York, followed in November-December 2005 by the new space of the Catherine Bastide gallery in Brussels, combines acting with dance and music, and color with black-and-white in a series of compelling cross-fades.*

■ Like all Sullivan's videos, *Five Economies* (2002) carries a good dose of theatricality, due mainly to the actors and the sets in which they perform. But, contrary to the common view, this does not make Sullivan's work a reflection on theater.<sup>(1)</sup> Rather, theater is used as a code or tool, in the same way as cinema, performance and dance (of which she has in-depth working knowledge). These media are melded into a unique hybrid whose discourse applies primarily to the field of the visual arts.



«Peter Floor 2». 2004. 10 x 216 x 211 cm. Plâtre  
Plaster





«Big Hunt». 2002. Projection vidéo sur 5 canaux, film 16 mm transféré sur DVD. Boucle de 22'. Noir et blanc  
5 channel video projection. 16mm film transferred to DVD. 22 minutes per loop. Black and white. No sound





«The Chittendens», 2005. Photographie couleur. Larg. : 60 cm. (Toutes les photos, court. galerie Catherine Bastide, Bruxelles ; © Catherine Sullivan)  
C-print





«Ice Floes on Franz Jozef Land». 2003. Film 16 mm transféré sur DVD. 4 films sonores de 20' et 1 de 40'  
16 mm b/w film transferred to DVD. 4 film of 20' and 1 of 40' sound



**CATHERINE SULLIVAN**

Née en / born 1968. Vit à / lives in Los Angeles

Expositions récentes / Recent shows:

2001 Galerie Christian Nagel, Cologne

2002 The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago ;

Galerie Catherine Bastide, Bruxelles

2003 Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford

2004 Kunsthalle Zurich ; Kunstverein Braunschweig ; Neuer

Aachener Kunstverein NAK, Aix-la-Chapelle ; Galerie Gio Marconi, Milan, Italie

2005 Tate Modern, Londres (18 nov. 2005 - 8 janv. 2006) ;

Metro Pictures, NY (nov. - déc.) ; Wiener Secession, Vienne

2006 Galerie Catherine Bastide, Bruxelles (20 janv. - 4 mars)

Sullivan based her first major work on the notion of transformation, as expounded by Elias Canetti; that is to say, as a weapon for fighting back against power, one that can manifest itself both in the form of pathologies and in the liberation of the subject. To explore this idea, she imagined a canvas based on five scenes from the movies, or from real life, and built five sets in the same studio. She then asked five actors to play the five scenes, one by one and, as they went from one set to another, to retain certain elements from the performances and emotions in the previous sets. The result is a handsome black-and-white video of 100 minutes projected in five 22-minute loops on five separate screens. The ensemble is at once austere in its fragmentation and profuse in its stylistic complexity and formal richness.

In 2003, her video *'Tis Pity She's a Fluxus Whore* brokered the unlikely union of a Jacobean play, *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* (John Ford, 1633), which describes the incestuous relationship between a brother and his sister, as presented in a scandal-raising production at the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, in 1943, and a program of Fluxus actions at the Festival of New Art in Aachen in 1964, where the public reaction was just as violent. In this work, Sullivan looks at the break between actor and public. She carried out meticulous research and codified and combined the styles of the two dramatic events in six scenes, then got the actor Andrzej Krukowski to perform these in the original venues, Hartford and Aachen. The resulting work consists of two

screens, with the six scenes performed in two contrasting styles on each one.

That same year, Sullivan made *Ice Floes of Franz Joseph Island*, for which the starting point was the Chechen hostage-taking in a Moscow theater in 2002, during a performance of the Russian musical *Nord Ost*. As Sullivan noted, "this event drew together participants of a very different order: the Moscow leisure class seeking pleasure and entertainment, and the Chechens using this same spectacle to assert their political demands." The musical, considered as a Russian version of such international stage hits as *Cats*, is itself based on a patriotic novel, *Two Captains*. What interested Sullivan here was exoticism and cultural conditioning. She took two chapters from the novel and out of that nucleus developed fifty pantomimes that all the actors in the piece were expected to learn, irrespective of the parts they were actually going to play. The video was shot in black-and-white at the premises of the Polish American Army Veterans' Association in Chicago, and then outside the Moscow Nights, an abandoned discothèque. The ensemble was presented over five screens.

**Signs and Evocations**

In 2004, *Ice Floes* was presented at the Braunschweig Kunstverein and, for the event, Sullivan made use of certain characteristics of the center's interior architecture as (originally) an 18th-century private villa, and connected these with elements from the building in Chicago. The result is a "staging" of the exhibition space which adds a further dimension to the many echoes, reflections and variations that give her projects their density.

Sullivan's latest piece, *The Chittendens*, was premiered at the Wiener Secession in June 2005 (it then went on to Tate Modern, the Catherine Bastide gallery, Metro Pictures and, finally, Gio Marconi in Milan. It comprises six chapters with a total duration of 104 minutes. The six films were shot in 16 mm then transferred onto video. The title refers to an insurance company. At the Secession, the work was broken down into a series of tableaux, the first of which juxtaposed two color films, *Poverty Island Lighthouse* and *The Resuscitation of Uplifting*. Shot on a deserted island off the coast of Wisconsin, these two films play on a set of 19th-century archetypes. A figure dressed in an American navy uniform from the period wanders around his boat off the shore of the island while another carries out a set of abstract manual tasks near an abandoned lighthouse. The lighthouse symbolizes both the exaltation of the individual, which these two first films demonstrate, and their alienation, represented by the insurance company that has taken the lighthouse as an emblem, and that gives the work its name. Gentle music, soft, bright colors and long, languishing shots give these two films a hypnotic charm tinged with irony. They also under-

score the bitterness of the chapters that follow. Shot in a mid-60s office building in Chicago, these stage all the possible combinations between sixteen actors and fourteen given attitudes. This project originated with a choreography, *D-Pattern*, developed by Sean Griffin, who also composed the sound track for *The Chittendens*. In the two chapters that follow, again filmed in black-and-white, the actors are dressed and lit in the film noir style of the 1950s. The penultimate chapter, the most spectacular, combines black-and-white and color in a sumptuous sequences of cross-fades. The installation ends with a film that is set in a small, abandoned office. The action could well be in the present day. The actors performing it are like marionettes, the choreography extremely standardized.

Sullivan has always claimed an interest in anthropology. *The Chittendens* is based on a set of attitudes reflecting the personality of each actor. These attitudes are then theatrically reduced or exaggerated, physically diminished or augmented, temporally abridged or extended. Sullivan's projects are based on the encounter between the performance of her actors and a set of limitations in the form of coded typologies. This new work is singular in that, unlike the previous ones, it does not refer to any precise element, but proceeds by signs and evocations.

Sullivan's works produce a highly distinctive impression. Their explicit references (the worlds of theater and dance, especially Yvonne Rainer, but also visual arts and in particular the work of Bruce Nauman) and their implicit allusions (the films, books and artworks that inspired her stagings) all create a familiar context. And yet the identification of these references is not enough to "explain" the work. Sullivan's pieces are quite brilliant by virtue of their consummate camera movement, composition, image, editing and directing of actors (she has the precision of a James Coleman or Stan Douglas), but they have no physical or emotional dimension. The spectator is denied the slightest empathy or identification, and must remain outside the situations that Sullivan sets up. Quite the opposite, then of the Actors Studio, whose methods Sullivan actually likes to parody. Sullivan's disembodied actors are so hemmed in by their limited repertoires of gestures, attitudes, settings and situations that the slightest non-compliance looks disturbingly pathological. But her works are not just dark, chill artifacts, purveyors of gloom. They fascinate, too, because of the humor and mystery behind their extreme rationalization. ■

Translation, C. Penwarden

(1) I have deliberately chosen not to talk about Sullivan's theatrical work here. Of equal importance to her video work, it warrants a separate analysis.

Anne Pontégnie is currently working on a book about Hans Hartung (*Editions 5 Continents*). Since January 2005 she has been curator of exhibitions at the Wiels art center in Brussels.