

## **The art of Catherine Sullivan and the Philosophy of Gilles Deleuze – Art Beyond Representation.**

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*“ Reason is always a region carved out of the irrational—not sheltered from the irrational at all, but traversed by it and only defined by a particular kind of relationship among irrational factors. Underneath all reason lies delirium, and drift.” (Deleuze, 2002 p.82)*

Just as the surgeon is seduced by the apparent simplicity of the surface of the human body as a container of such immense complexity, and yet it is precisely this fact that propels him to peel back this conceit to uncover what lies beneath. This is how it was when I approached a critique of *The Chittenden’s* by American artist Catherine Sullivan – an excavation of its bones if you will, as well as an examination of the intentions of the artists working methods and intentions.

*The Chittenden’s* is a six screen video installation conceived by Sullivan in collaboration with the composer Sean Griffin, who wrote the score for the piece. It is performed by sixteen actors and lasts an almost feature film length 104 minutes. Sullivan initially used 16mm film stock, which she then transferred to video, culminating in an exhibition at the Secession gallery in Vienna where it was broken down into a series of tableaux. Each of the six ‘chapters’ were juxtaposed with each other, curated as diptychs rather than running them simultaneously across six screens. Whilst exhibiting Sullivan’s work at the FRIEZE art fair in London in 2006 TATE Modern purchased *The Chittenden’s* from The Catherine Bastide Gallery.

One could aesthetically think of *The Chittenden’s* as a collage with its layering of black and white and colour cross fades (see Fig. 1 overleaf) of each actor repeating the same set of gestures, as well as structurally due to her willingness to exhibit the 6 sections in different formats and combinations, more akin to a montage or site specific installation.



**Fig. 1 Virtuous Woman and Mean Showgirl (lynching retreat)**

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Both Sullivan's "stylistic economies and gestural regimes, or re-enactments of historic performances" (Sullivan, 2005, p.16) and her interest in "devices which calibrate or measure 'dramatic' content, and devices which pressure expressive and emotive content," (Sullivan, 2005, p.16) are strategies that reanimate the Brechtian experiments presented by Pina Bausch and her Tanztheater Wuppertal in the 1970's as well as The Dancers Workshop Company. Sullivan refers to her performances as "second order drama," (Walker 2008 p.1) which suggests a distancing from what might be called 'first order drama,' such as Hollywood cinema, with its logical schema, its beginnings, middles and ends, its familiar stories.

The internal dynamic of process and creation which underpins The Chittenden's would in Deleuzian terms represent the expression of a set of *singularities*. As Colebrook states when discussing Deleuze, "a cinema of singularities would present colours, movements, sounds, textures, tones and lights that are not connected and organised into recognised and ordered wholes" (Colebrook 2002 p.33). Deleuze's concepts do not seek to explain what something *is* but how it *becomes* and what its *affective* purpose is. I would align this project alongside Sullivan's deconstruction of the dramatic devices that are employed in mainstream cinema, and which almost always serve to support the narrative, the telling of a story. Sullivan begins to privilege and bring to the forefront of her practice these *singularities*, exposing the generative structures and constituent parts, from which the homogenous grand narratives of modern cinema continue to be upheld and reinstated.

At times we are seeing the reactions of an actor or actress to an unseen protagonist as illustrated by The Virtuous Woman as she screams, stumbling backwards away from the camera, terrorised by an unseen assailant. This position becomes occupied by us the viewer, (as well as the camera) implicating us as an active participant in her reality, rather than an imposter spying on her voyeuristically. We as a viewer are being acted on in a new and disturbing way; the camera dispassionately leading us forwards to encounter a series of characters in each of the rooms of the abandoned Chittenden offices – e.g the Mean Showgirl and the Peaceable Savage (see Fig. 2) all in various stages of psychological breakdown or dispossession. Deleuze uses the term '*affect*' to describe a predominantly visceral reaction which art can elicit in us and when relating *affect* to *concept*, that "affect, by contrast, is the power to interrupt synthesis and order." (Colebrook 2002 p.35). The Chittenden's power is generated through these affective registers of interruption and disruption occurring within and through these characters and their various 'attitudes.'<sup>1</sup>

Sullivan deploys a systematic rationale akin to a semiotic code to generate the actions and attitudes assigned to the sixteen actors and their appropriation of character archetypes, which she says reveals her interest in, "the body's capacity for signification," (Walker 2002 p.1) – some relate to Veblen's<sup>2</sup> archetypes drawn

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<sup>1</sup> These 'attitudes' represent a splitting of various expressions into units that are according to each performer's 'score' minimized/maximized – extended/abbreviated – expanded/reduced.

<sup>2</sup> See Thorstein Veblen's book '*Theory of the Leisure Class*' for more information on these archetypes, or alternatively the catalogue published by the Secession gallery to accompany Sullivan's exhibition which is also available via the Catherine Bastide Gallery.

from ‘the leisure class,’ others inspired by the setting of the offices and the wellspring of maritime images called up by the lighthouse logo.

The self possession and alienation of *The Peaceable Savage* (see Fig. 2 below) and that of others such as *The Virtuous Woman* seem subject to an illogical and discontinuous set of emotions. Imaginatively we are outpaced and unable to fully apprehend either emotionally or intellectually what we see before us. This is what Deleuze terms a *precept* resulting in an *affect*. In essence it is the breaking apart of normative cognitions of sense or sensibilities, which in turn induces a state of affective pleasure, ecstasy or horror.



**Fig. 2 *The Peaceable Savage* – Morbid Naturalism © SECESSION 2005**

The liminality of their expressions and their lack of context or continuity is intensely disquieting, coupled with their autonomy and the impression that the minatory forces that they are menaced by, from within or without are occurring ‘*in vacuo*’. This inundation of violent emotions are all the more anxiety inducing for appearing behind the veil of the screen. This double separation, through not allowing us to witness or approach these actors as existing ‘*in time*’ is purposeful, not just because it allows Sullivan to control the position of the viewer in relation to the actors, but because it creates a situation whereby we are, “denied the slightest empathy or identification, and must remain outside the situations Sullivan sets up.” (Pontegnie 2006 p.35). Unlike a theatrical play – there will be no encore, these actors will never reappear ‘as themselves.’

“Deleuze’s definitions...claim to explain not what something *is* but its genesis or how it becomes.” (Colebrook 2002, p. 34) and it is this project that I would align with Sullivan’s practice in how she seeks to reveal the process by which actors are acted upon, the underlying structures that give way to grand narratives and cinema itself. I would suggest that through *The Chittenden’s* we witness a philosophy in motion, a schematic excitation of Deleuze’s definitions in a physical form. Deleuze explores how, “art *works* by taking us back from composites of experience to the affects from which those synthesised wholes emerge,” (Colebrook 2002, p. 35). This is reconfigured in how Sullivan seeks to reveal the, “...devices employed to produce and generate the behaviours of the performers who execute them.<sup>3</sup> Be they written texts, stylistic economies and gestural regimes, or re-enactments of historic performances...” (Sullivan, 2005 p.16)

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<sup>3</sup> These devices would through the lens of Deleuzian philosophy be described as *singularities* that generate a multiplicity thought of as a whole.

as well as addressing their, "circumstances of training or cultural orientation through a biography of familiar or absorbed forms." (Ibid.)

This in Deleuze's terms is a way of, "stepping back from our composed and ordered world and *thinking* the differences from which it is composed." Through the undoing of progressive and successive *time-images*, which we normally encounter in films, the "chaos of singularities," (Colebrook, 2002, p.36) are revealed to us, discontinuous and disordered, overwhelming our synthesising and ordering instincts. Deleuze would maintain that this is what art should do in its highest form - shake us free from our certainties so that we can *become* and experience ourselves and the world of phenomena in new, hitherto un-represented ways. He describes this as the, "...*power or potential* to free images from a fixed point of view is what makes cinema, cinema. Cinema has its own way of creating differences." (Colebrook, 2002, p.37). He also refers to *intensities* generated by *affect* and that, "*affect* is intensive because it happens to us, across us; it is not objectified and quantifiable as a thing that we then perceive of or of which we are conscious." (Ibid.). This brings me back to the visceral way in which *The Chittenden's* disturbs and overwhelms the viewer, how it *affects us*.

I would suggest that this affect is brought about by a 'distillation,' of dramatic content, whereby Sullivan chops away at all that is unnecessary or merely there to provide a context to that moment in a film which reveals the central idea or artifice around which the whole story pivots - the sound that makes us start off screen or the image of violence which raises the body temperature.

It is also clear that *The Chittenden's* (and Sullivan's practice generally) is an extension as well as an addition to Antonin Artaud's manifesto *The Theatre and its Double*, whereby he proposes a theatre of cruelty. He proposed that its violent physicality would shatter the false reality, believing that text had been a tyrant over meaning calling instead for a theatre made up of a unique language, halfway between thought and gesture, a passionate and convulsive conception of life, to undermine the way in which reality appears to be a consensus (Artaud, 1958). Artaud could also be thought of as being unequivocally Deleuzian in his approach.

Attempting an overarching illation of Sullivan's complex practice is fraught with difficulties due to the many composite forms that constitute the whole – intertextual references, drama, dance, theatre, film and cinema. The complexity and intellectual rigor behind each of Sullivan's projects is what animates and agitates the piece from within so we can witness something that begins to embrace a new methodology, philosophy even, and an experience of something that lays out a new territory for approaching filmic language. Through its richly filmic qualities and its complex, non linear structure, *The Chittenden's* is essentially a hybrid project, but one that survives its own knowing complexities to emerge as both a richly aesthetic and deeply philosophical project, one that Sullivan hopes, "generates a spectrum of effects" (Sullivan, 2005, p.25). In this, Sullivan is largely successful as these effects are both repellent, enthralling and mystifying.

**More information on Catherine Sullivan can be found via the following sites and publications:**

[www.catherinebastide.com](http://www.catherinebastide.com)

[www.tate.org.uk](http://www.tate.org.uk)

www.afoundation.co.uk

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<[http://renaissancesociety.org/site/Exhibitions/Essay.20.0.0.0.0.html?RENSOC\\_SESSIONID=6d0218400952bfb1f426efbb6542483d](http://renaissancesociety.org/site/Exhibitions/Essay.20.0.0.0.0.html?RENSOC_SESSIONID=6d0218400952bfb1f426efbb6542483d)> [Accessed: 03/05/08]

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Pontegnie, A (2006) *art press 318: Hybride*

Sullivan, C (et al) (2005) *SECESSION, Catherine Sullivan, The Chittendens*,  
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