May 5 – June 16, 2002
Opening reception: Sunday, May 5, 2002, 4:00–7:00pm, featuring a talk with the artist from 5:00–6:00pm, and a performance directed by the artist at 6:30pm

**Catherine Sullivan**

*Five Economies (big hunt/little hunt)*

The success, even the survival, of this site has come inconsequentially to depend on their ability to defeat theater. –Michael Fried, art and objectives, 1967

**Body Language**

Those fighting words were issued in defense of modernist painting. They came from an essay which elucidated the crystalline form of one modern art’s central features, namely greater medium specificity. Fried was one of modern painting’s most rabid proponents. What made painting worthy of consideration as a “modern” discipline was that it celebrated properties (color, form, support) unique to it as an art form. Arguing as a point, Fried defined theater negatively, as something “between the arts,” a hybrid activity into which modernist art forms could only degenerate. He characterized the struggle to avoid such fate as an “arist.”

Based on the work of Los Angeles-based artist Catherine Sullivan, Fried’s “arist” is a historic antecedent of modernist theater. After receiving a BFA in acting from the California Institute of the Arts, Sullivan (b. 1966) worked in numerous stage productions including a role in Chicago’s Theater Center in 1987 she received a Masters Degree in Fine Art at Art Center College of Design in Los Angeles. Although she has worked in a variety of media, Sullivan’s primary focus has been creating original theater and video works that lay bare the architectural conventions and the mechanisms of expression. Her true media are performers on agents of expression (she, them, he, us), dancers, musicians. Sullivan refers to her performances as "second order drama." They consist of re-staged moments of dramatic or performative taken from sources as disparate as pitch-perfect lyrics and Yvonne Rainer choreography, Five Economies (big hunt/little hunt) is a two-part work whose main component, Big Hunt, is a five-part video projection. Sceenoned on a stage, the work consists of re-staged and choreographed scenarios based on a variety of sources including several popular films. The question relevant to all of her staged performances is how does work express. How does a performer literally inhabit emotional memory? What are the formal characteristics that allow for the transmission of emotions and expressive content? But Sullivan is not interested in deconstructing theatrical conventions it is reconfiguring conflating forms of expression to replace, in words, “the bodily capacity for expression.”

Five Economies (big hunt/little hunt) is a particularly elaborate work drawing on scenes from films as diverse as The Miracle Worker, Monty Python, Tamil, No, and What Ever Happened to Baby Jane as well as imagined episodes from the story of Blinde Boozes, a 20 year old woman who tried to cloak the welfare system by passing as an orphaned 10 year old boy. There are several inter-scene zones (Busines, dance floor, stage, monolog, melody). Each contains a permutation of these characters from Sullivan’s source performing simultaneously. The drama is reduced to movement and facial expression staged in an emotional excess extrapolated from the sources. The empathy is non-verbal gestural extends the performance well beyond the original scene’s intent bringing it into a realm of bodily signification Sullivan unceremoniously juxtaposes with dance. In Big Hunt the layer of choreography is based on theatrical funereal game. The result is a baroque, hybrid theater for which the term post-modern is an understatement. Despite the degree of complexity, Sullivan actually describes her work as an influence rather than baroque in distinction which undermines the fact that she is expressing, rather than further embellishing, an emotional surplus already evident to suits. In addition what Sullivan’s performances move toward is the projection of affective madness which veers away from the nation’s museums. Sullivan’s favorite example of an economy involves the role in which an actor’s suicidality is expressed by playing a character with a physical or mental disability. These roles are often deemed “difficult” or “Oscar material” because they require what Sullivan calls “an athletic theatricality.” Big Hunt’s most obvious example is Arthur Penn’s 1962 film, The Miracle Worker whose main character Helen Keller, originally played by Patty Duke Astin, was blind, deaf and mute. Or another example, chosen by the artist, is the image on the reverse side of this poster that features Sophia Loren, at the height of her career, as a peasant in The Man of La Mancha. The theatrical impulse of poverty—by definition has torn clothing, sweat-soaked posturing—is laughable in relationship to the characters, not to mention cleavage quotient. Loren was no doubt expected to bring in the tears. Using the theatrical writings of playwright and novelist Elie Wiesel as a conceptual framework, Sullivan locates the source of theater’s power in public rituals of collective lamentation. (There are those for whom we cry, and those who cry for us.) Combining anthropology and psychosocial modes of a guillotine-process complex, Carretti nods collective lamentation in rituals of the hunt, Funeral, the hunting pack turns to rituals of lamentation for adulation. For Sullivan, this ritual of theater and the drama of spectacles. Hence her choice of nobble (big hunt/little hunt). In Sullivan’s words, “Perhaps in the theatrical lamentation, the domesticated crowd, earlier referred to as ‘the pack’, acknowledges its own destructiveness and absolves guilt of guilt.” According to Sullivan’s work, theater is not a discipline into which modernist art forms degenerate. It is a discipline in which modernist art forms could evolve. Due to an extremely limited grasp of theater history Ford took to acknowledge that theater had to first undergo the same degree of self-reflection he accorded to modernist painting. Modernist theater, however, did not adhere to the imperative of dismantling tradition with the same degree of honor as modernist painting. From the outset, modernist theater’s goals were not so much aimed at revolution as they were establishing pedagogical conveniences for training actors. Sullivan’s work may be classified as post modern only insofar as these goals have been achieved. In a direct lineage from Konstantin Stanislavski’s System to Lee Strasberg and the school of Method Acting, it is safe to say they have been. Contrary to establishing a break with tradition, modernist theater’s greatest triumph was the formal codification of expression from Kane Tragedy to television melodrama. Although Sullivan’s work deploys rather than deconstructs theatrical conventions, it is not less analytical. It is critical through a complex synthesis of that most rudimentary form of expression known as body language.