

Catherine Sullivan

Five Economies (big hunt/little hunt)

a coproduction of The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago and the UCLA Hammer Museum

May 5 – June 16, 2002

The Renaissance Society
at The University of Chicago

5811 South Ellis Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 60637, Phone: (773) 702-8670, <http://www.renaissancesociety.org>

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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

Related Events

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Performance

GOLD STANDARD
Sunday, May 5, 6:30 pm

Catherine Sullivan refers to her performances as "second order dramas," steeped in the emotional excess of theatrical convention. For this performance, Sullivan wrote an open letter to all of the theater companies in Chicago asking them to participate in the restaging of the classic scene from Arthur Penn's 1962 movie *The Miracle Worker* in which the deaf, mute and blind Helen Keller is being socialized through force applied by her teacher Annie Sullivan. The scene will be restaged in a number of different theatrical modes (hysteric, melancholic, manic, paranoiac) by ten sets of Helens and Annies, en masse.

Concert

FRANCES-MARIE UITTI, CELLIST
Wednesday, May 8, 8:00 pm

The Society is excited to host an encore performance by one of the most sought after talents in the world. Uitti has performed definitive interpretations of works by some of the late 20th century's greatest composers including Kurtag, Scelsi and Nono. In 1975, she developed a double-bow technique that transformed her cello into a truly polyphonic instrument capable of sustained chordal and intricate multivoiced writing. The bill features her own compositions which will incorporate the gallery's echo as raw acoustic material.

Concert

MARC UNTERNAEHRER, TUBA
WITH ENSEMBLE NOAMNESIA
Tuesday, May 14, 8:00 pm

Tuba talent extraordinaire, Marc Unternaehr comes to Chicago from Lucern. His repertoire of solo works for tuba includes compositions by Luigi Nono and Giacinto Scelsi among others. This concert will feature these as well as works for small chamber ensembles performed with members of Ensemble Noamnesia. This concert will take place in the gallery. FREE

Performance

LOTTA MELIN, DANCER/CHOREOGRAPHER;
TERRI KAPSALIS, PERFORMER/WRITER
Sunday, June 16, 5:00 pm

Melin's solo choreography and Kapsalis' wit and violin work make for performances that are lyrical and spikey, moving and humorous, but above all precise and intelligent. Lotta Melin currently resides in Stockholm. She is working as a choreographer for the German ensemble "Die Audiogruppe" and as an improvising dancer in collaboration with such artists as Sonic Youth, Mats Gustafsson, Barry Guy, Michael Zerang, and Leif Elggren. Chicago-based Terri Kapsalis is a founding member of Theater Oobleck. Her voice and improvised violin can be heard on CDs such as "Van's Peppy Syncopators" with John Corbett and Hal Rammel and Lou Mallozzi's "Whole or By the Slice" (Penumbra), John Corbett's "I'm Sick About My Hat" and Sebi Tramontana's "Night People" (Atavistic), and Tony Conrad's "Slapping Pythagoras" (Table of the Elements).

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Museum Hours:

Tuesday - Friday: 10 am - 5 pm
Saturday, Sunday: 12 - 5 pm
Closed Mondays

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The Renaissance Society

Body Language

The success, even the survival, of the arts has come increasingly to depend on their ability to defeat theater.
—Michael Fried, *ART AND OBJECTHOOD, 1967*

Those fighting words were issued in defense of modernist painting. They come from an essay which articulated in crystalline form one of 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, surface, support) unique to it as an art form. Arguing as a purist, 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 war.

Based on the work of Los Angeles-based artist Catherine Sullivan, Fried's "war" is an historical remnant of modernism for sure. After receiving a BFA in acting from the California Institute of the Arts, Sullivan (b. 1968) worked in numerous stage productions including a stint at Chicago's Trapdoor Theater. In 1997 she received a Masters Degree in Fine Art from 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 dramaturgical conventions and the mechanics of expression. Her true media are performers or agents of expression be they actors, dancers, or musicians. Sullivan refers to her performances as

"second order drama." They consist of re-staged moments of dramatic or performative tension taken from sources as disparate as Ted Nugent 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 (15 minutes running time). Screened on a single wall the length of the gallery, the silent, black and white footage consists of re-staged and choreographed scenarios based on a variety of sources including several popular films. The question relevant to all her staged performances is, how does expression work. How does a performer literally inhabit emotional memory? What are the formal characteristics that allow for the transmission of expressive or emotive content? But Sullivan is less interested in deconstructing theatrical conventions than she is reconfiguring codified forms of expression to explore, in her words, "the body's capacity for signification."

Five Economies (big hunt/little hunt) is a particularly elaborate work drawing on scenes from films as diverse as *The Miracle Worker*, *Marat/Sade*, *Persona*, *Tim*, and *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* as well as imagined episodes from the true story of Birdie Jo Hoaks, a 25 year old woman who tried to cheat the welfare system by passing as an orphaned 13 year old boy. There are several mise en scene (lounge, dance floor, stage, sunroom,

kitchen). Each contains a permutation of these characters from Sullivan's sources performing simultaneously. The drama is reduced to movement and facial expression steeped in an emotional excess extrapolated from the source. The emphasis on non-verbal gesticulation extends the performance well beyond the original scene's intent bringing it into a realm of bodily signification Sullivan uncannily juxtaposes with dance. In *Big Hunt* this layer of choreography is based on antiquated Irish funerary games. The result is a baroque, hybrid theater for which the term post-modern is an understatement. Despite the degrees of complexity, Sullivan actually describes her work as effusive rather than baroque; a distinction which underscores the fact that she is exposing, rather than further embellishing, an emotional surplus already endemic to acting. In addition what Sullivan's performances reveal through their quirkiness is a fundamental alienation which the craft of acting seeks to dispel, namely that between the body as a vehicle of perception and the body as vehicle of expression.

The character groupings are arranged according to a desired set of emotional effects and affections Sullivan refers to as economies. Sullivan uses the word economy in reference to a system of theatrical tropes that generate an emotional currency or investment. The five economies are based

on a representational logic distilled from each of the sources. Sullivan's favorite example of an economy involves roles in which an actor's virtuosity 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 trope of poverty—bedraggled hair, torn clothing, vulnerable posturing—is laughable in relationship to the charisma, not to mention cleavage quotient, Loren was no doubt expected to bring to the role.

Using the theoretical writings of playwright and novelist Elias Canetti 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 psychoanalytic models of a guilt/persecution complex, Canetti roots collective lamentation in rituals of the hunt. Guilty of slaughter, the hunting pack turns to rituals of lamentation for absolution. For Sullivan, this ritual



is theater and the drama of spectacle. Hence her choice of subtitle (*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 itself of guilt."

According to Sullivan's work, theater is not a discipline into which modernist art forms degenerate, it is a discipline into which modernist art forms could evolve. Due to an extremely limited grasp of theater history Fried failed to acknowledge that theater had in fact undergone the same degree of

self-reflexivity he accorded to modernist painting. Modernist theater, however, did not adhere to the imperative of dismantling tradition with the same degree of fervor as modernist painting. From the outset, modernist theater's goals were not so much aimed at revolution as they were establishing pedagogical conventions 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 Greek Tragedy to television melodrama. Although Sullivan's work deploys rather than deconstructs theatrical conventions, it is no less analytic. It is critical through a complex synthesis of that most rudimentary form of expression known as body language.

Catherine Sullivan: *Five Economies (big hunt/little hunt)* is a coproduction of The Renaissance Society and UCLA Hammer Museum. The Renaissance Society's presentation of Catherine Sullivan: *Five Economies (big hunt/little hunt)* has been made possible by the American Center Foundation. Additional support has been received from the Chicago Community Trust, the CityArts Program of The Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs, a municipal agency; the Danielson Foundation; the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency; The Lannan Foundation; The LLLWW Foundation; The Peter Norton Family Foundation; The Pritzker Foundation; Regents Park by The Clinton Companies; The Sara Lee Foundation; The Siragusa Foundation; WPWR-TV Channel 50 Foundation and our membership. Indirect support has been received from The Institute of Museum and Library Services, a federal agency offering general operating support to the nation's museums.

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[this side]
Hind foot of a 761 pound male grizzly bear
Photo by Paul Kutzer

[that side]
Sophia Loren as Aldonza, the serving maid in
Man of La Mancha
Courtesy MCM Clip and Stills
Photo by Kobal