

MELANIE GILLIGAN AT CHISENHALE

7 May - 20 June 2010

PRESS COVERAGE

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PRESS REACTION

...an acutely observed four-part mini-drama with a twist.

Rebecca Geldard, *Saatchi Online*, 10 May 2010

Gilligan's acute diagnosis, in the guise of a cracking yarn, inserts some pressing questions into the hardware.

Maria Walsh, *Art Monthly 337*, June 2010

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“LIKE AN ANIMAL WHOSE
ATTENTION IS DRAWN AWAY
FROM THE NEED TO SURVIVE”

BY DAN KIDNER



Top - *Self-Capital*, 2009, produced by Galleria Franco Soffiantino, Torino. Courtesy: the artist and Franco Soffiantino, Torino.

Bottom - *Crisis in the Credit System*, 2008, commissioned and produced by Artangel Interaction, London. Courtesy: the artist and Artangel Interaction, London.

Narrative structure and economic and social superstructure are the two poles that can always be found in the work of Melanie Gilligan. It presents complex stories and representations that explicitly or implicitly reveal the effects of a crisis state on the actors in her films, who often play different parts, as well as on the artist herself. An unstable situation that leads to a subversion of roles and outcomes.

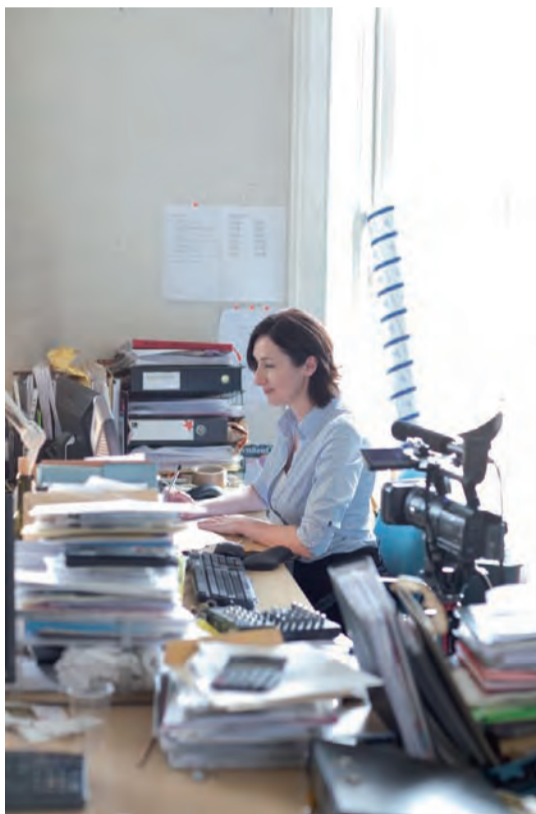
Melanie Gilligan's film, *Self-Capital: ICA* (2009) was written, rehearsed and shot whilst she was in-residence at the ICA, London, for a week during the gallery's 2009 exhibition and events programme, *Talk Show*. Her presence, in the upper galleries, researching and working through ideas with an actress, signalled her readiness to conceive, examine and revise her work and working practices in public. To see an artist's research methods up close, and to see that artist express doubt about the form and content of their work – as Gilligan did when she presented the “finished” work at the ICA in October 2009 – was at once embarrassing, and a privilege. She, however, is acutely aware of performing her role as an artist, and her body of work so far has been mainly concerned with these kinds of performances of prescribed roles. Working closely with actors on her films and performances, she carefully dismantles, reflects and fractures structures of what she has called “nested theatricalities”.

In *Self-Capital: ICA* the actress, Penelope McGhie, plays all the roles: receptionist, two analysts, and their patient, who introduces herself as “global economy” and is undergoing therapy after suffering “post-traumatic stress after a complete meltdown”.

Gilligan imagines the global economy as a human body onto which the economy's functions, needs and desires can be mapped. Conversely, bodily and mental breakdown are explored as metaphors for the breakdown and implosion of financial systems. If in this instance, the body stands in for the global economy, then presumably the ICA stands in for the whole world, or maybe it is interchangeable for any institution that supports and relies upon the continuing health of the global economy. Which ever, the ICA presented the artist with an arena, within which ideas about the limits of language and the connection of mind to body, cause and effect, under late capitalism, could be tested. The therapist untethers the patient from her normal thought patterns so that she is, “like an animal whose attention is drawn away from the need to survive”, before imploring her to “listen” to her body. In this state the patient roams the institution; her actions and words free from having to mean or signify – the body unmediated, the institution cradling and instructing. (Watching the film in light of current revelations about the ICA's own financial meltdown adds a certain frisson.)

Gilligan's interest in, and use of, biological metaphors to explore post-Fordist labour conditions, and financial crises, is also in evidence in her four-part film, *Crisis in the Credit System* (2008). In it, five employees of an investment bank are depicted at a brainstorming session, role-playing scenarios in which they unpick and tackle the route causes of the credit crunch. Or at least that is the idea. The

employees quite quickly go off message, mixing metaphors and developing story lines that threaten to compromise the purpose of the workshop. To begin with, they race through scenarios that look back to the beginnings of the current crisis: hostile take-overs, hedge funds trading debt etc., before spinning off into more fantastic territory. In Episode 2 one of the characters role-playing a financial journalist asserts, “today abstractions are real, or at least real enough to turn a profit”. But Gilligan isn't simply interested in illustrating, di-



Melanie Gilligan residency at ICA, London. Courtesy: ICA, London.

dactically, that trading something as “immaterial” as debt is a recipe for disaster, albeit a peculiarly benign disaster – as it was played out rhetorically in the broadcast media. Instead, the financial crisis simply provided her with another opportunity to examine late-capitalist processes of abstraction and reification.

In one scene from the film a market analyst at Delphi Capital Management sits “in a trance” in a dark room, absorbing and filtering market data. His predictions, sold to speculators, range from the banal to the ridiculous, “lunge to catch a falling knife... up sharply to 87% after IPO to 10%”. Gilligan, as in previous work, mixes references to ancient Greece and Rome: the Delphic Oracle sells predictions to Ian Numen, the CEO of a private equity firm; private equity recast as the energy inherent in all things. As the oracle continues to harness the power of the unconscious mind – “the most powerful network processor known to man” – his body

begins to show the effects of this filtering as he convulses in spasms.

In the final episode of *Crisis...* Gilligan's ciphers lose themselves in biological metaphors; concepts become things, subject to evolution: money grows exponentially, reproducing, becoming cannibalistic, before realising that it can't reproduce – it is sterile. Technology, similarly, is described as a growing organism. On the film's soundtrack Gilligan sings the title song with icy insouciance: “crisis in the credit system... I found a bubble inside a crisis, a hole full of emptiness”. Words lose their meaning in the film and become empty vessels, filled by other meanings or no meaning at all. *Everything That Is Solid...* conceived, written and filmed before Lehman Brothers filed for bankruptcy on 15 September 2008, the film is as prescient as it is searching. But although it focuses on the current financial crisis the film actually deals more generally with the types of abstractions and speculations that underpin both contemporary culture and economics at the beginning of the 21st century. Throughout *Crisis...* Gilligan always seems aware of the fine line between conveying information and storytelling, before in the final episode attempting a critique of both.

In an earlier performance work, *The Miner's Object* (2006), the artist also pitched the “art” of storytelling against the “act” of conveying information and revealed how easily one could turn into the other. Employing a theatrical *mise-en-abyme*, *The Miner's Object* sets out to map the limits of performativity. The performance consists of an actress reading a text, written by the artist, that tells the story of the eponymous miner and his attempt to tell a story to his supervisor. The supervisor in his turn also tells a story, and then there are stories within the stories that are also told. Facing the audience through the transparent glass screens of two teleprompters (the sort used by politicians and celebrities at award ceremonies to give the illusion that their speeches are unscripted), the actress performs the text to the best of her acting abilities. She begins by quoting Benjamin on the art of storytelling, which, he writes, “does not aim to convey the gist of an event the way that information or a report does”. *The Miner's Object* proceeds to simultaneously prove and disprove this point.

A similar hall of mirrors is constructed in the performance work, *Prairial, Year 215* (2006) which deals with a subject Gilligan continues to return to: interpretations of the cultural and political significance of the French Revolution. Two characters – a suited lawyer and a contemporary artist in pyjamas – spin yarns and swap opinions. The artist remonstrates with the “intellectual property lawyer” but neither character



Melanie Gilligan installation shots.
Courtesy: ICA, London. Photo: Steve White.

maintains a stable position with respect to the legacy of the revolution. The artist, at the end of a long speech about how people then, as now, are forced to hand power over to representatives, states that, “we sit back and watch as politics play out in front of us. A bit like theatre”. In Gilligan’s work performers often perform roles within roles, slotting into different positions, a barely concealed superstructure dictating their behaviour and keeping them in their places. It is this superstructure that she attempts to uncover, and even occasionally calls it by its proper names: the global economy, the post-fordist neo-liberal state, or simply, capitalism. And she too has a part to play on this *Theatrum Mundi*, which she also reflects on – a player in her own story within a story.

DI DAN KIDNER

Struttura narrativa e sovrastruttura economico-sociale sono due poli sempre presenti nel lavoro di Melanie Gilligan. Una pratica che mette in scena storie complesse e rappresentazioni che più o meno esplicitamente tradiscono gli effetti di una condizione di crisi sugli attori dei suoi film, che spesso recitano parti diverse, nonché sull’artista stessa. Una congiuntura instabile, che scatena un sovvertimento nei ruoli e negli esiti.

Il film di Melanie Gilligan *Self-Capital: ICA* (2009) è stato scritto, provato e girato durante la settimana di permanenza dell’artista all’ICA di Londra. Il soggiorno ha avuto luogo nel 2009, durante la mostra “Talk Show” e il relativo programma di eventi. Il fatto che Gilligan si trovasse lì, nelle gallerie superiori, conducesse la propria ricerca e riflettesse sulle varie idee insieme a un’attrice, evidenzia la sua prontezza nel concepire, esaminare e rivedere in pubblico la propria opera e le proprie pratiche di lavoro. Vedere da vicino le metodologie di ricerca di un artista, e vedere quello stesso artista esprimere dubbi sulla forma e il contenuto del proprio lavoro – come Gilligan ha fatto quando ha presentato l’opera “finita” all’ICA, nell’ottobre del 2009 – è al tempo stesso fonte d’imbarazzo e un privilegio. L’artista, tuttavia, è acutamente consapevole di recitare una parte e, d’altro canto, il corpus delle sue opere, fino a quel momento, ha fondamentalmente manifestato un interesse per l’interpretazione di ruoli prefissati. Lavorando a stretto contatto con gli attori dei suoi film e delle sue performance, Gilligan è molto attenta a smantellare, riflettere e fare a pezzi le strutture di quelle che lei definisce “teatralità nidificate”.

In *Self-Capital: ICA*, l’attrice Penelope McGhie interpreta tutti i ruoli: l’addetta all’accettazione, le due analiste, e la loro paziente, quest’ultima si presenta come l’“economia globale”, costretta ad andare in terapia dopo essere stata colpita da “stress post-traumatico in seguito a un disastro totale”.

Gilligan immagina l’economia globale come un corpo umano su cui sia possibile proiettare le funzioni, i bisogni e i desideri dell’economia. Viceversa, il tracollo fisico e quello mentale sono analizzati come metafore del crollo e dell’implosione dei sistemi finanziari. Se il corpo sta a rappresentare l’economia globale, allora, presumibilmente, l’ICA rappresenta il mondo intero, o forse è un simbolo intercambiabile per qualsiasi istituzione che supporti e faccia affidamento sulla persistenza di un’economia globale in buona salute. Quale che sia l’opzione, l’ICA ha offerto all’artista un’arena entro cui poter mettere alla prova le proprie idee sui limiti del linguaggio e sulla connessione tra corpo e mente, e tra causa ed effetto nel tardo capitalismo. La terapeuta costringe la paziente a svincolarsi dai suoi normali schemi di pensiero, affinché diventi “come un animale la cui attenzione è distolta dalla necessità di sopravvivere”, prima d’implorarla di “ascoltare” il suo corpo. In questo stato, la paziente vaga dentro l’istituzione; le sue azioni sono libere dall’obbligo di avere, o fornire, un significato; il corpo è privo di mediazione, con l’istituzione che lo culla e lo istruisce. (Il fatto di guardare il film alla luce delle attuali rivelazioni sul tracollo finanziario dello stesso ICA agguinge un certo brivido.)

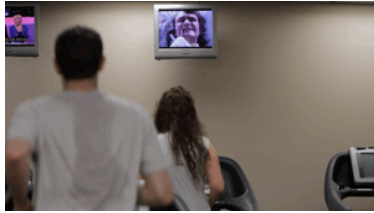
L’interesse di Gilligan per le metafore biologiche, e l’uso che ne fa per indagare le condizioni di lavoro post-fordiste e le crisi economiche emerge chiaramente anche nel suo film in quattro parti *Crisis in the Credit System* (2008). Nel film, cinque dipendenti di una banca d’investimenti sono ritratti durante un *brainstorming*, nel corso del quale fanno giochi di ruolo, immaginando scenari in

cui devono smontare e analizzare le cause del *credit crunch*. O almeno, quella è l’idea. Gli impiegati, ben presto, perdono di vista le consegne e cominciano a mescolare metafore e a sviluppare linee di racconto che minacciano di compromettere gli scopi del seminario. Tanto per cominciare, percorrono scenari che guardano indietro agli inizi dell’attuale crisi – acquisizioni ostili, fondi di copertura che negoziano titoli di debito, ecc. – prima di partire per la tangente e avventurarsi in territori più fantastici. Nel secondo episodio uno dei personaggi, che interpreta il ruolo di un giornalista economico, afferma: “Al giorno d’oggi le astrazioni sono reali, o almeno abbastanza reali da produrre un profitto”. Ma a Gilligan non interessa semplicemente dimostrare, in modo didascalico, che negoziare qualcosa di “immateriale”, come il debito, è una ricetta per il disastro, quantunque un disastro insolitamente benevolo, così come è stato retoricamente presentato nei media. Invece, la crisi finanziaria le ha fornito una nuova opportunità di esaminare i processi tardo-capitalisti di astrazione e reificazione. In una scena del film, un analista di mercato della Delphi Capital Management siede “in trance” in una stanza buia, assorbendo e filtrando dati di mercato. Le sue previsioni, vendute agli speculatori, spaziano dal banale al ridicolo, “scattano in avanti per afferrare un coltello che sta cadendo... salgono rapidamente all’87% dopo un’IPO al 10%”. Come in altre opere precedenti, Gilligan introduce riferimenti all’antichità greca e romana: l’Oracolo di Delfi vende le sue previsioni a Ian Numen, l’amministratore delegato di una società di *private equity*, dove il *private equity* è visto come una forma d’energia insita in tutte le cose. Mentre l’oracolo continua a imbrigliare il potere dell’inconscio – “il più potente processore di rete che sia noto all’uomo” – il suo corpo comincia a mostrare gli effetti di quest’operazione di filtraggio, venendo colto da spasmi.

Nell’episodio conclusivo di *Crisis...* i messaggi cifrati di Gilligan si perdono in metafore biologiche; i concetti diventano cose, soggette a evoluzione: il denaro aumenta esponenzialmente, moltiplicandosi, diventando cannibalistico, prima di rendersi conto che non è in grado di riprodursi, che è sterile. La tecnologia, allo stesso modo, è descritta come un organismo che cresce. Nella colonna sonora del film, Gilligan canta la canzone del titolo con gelida noncuranza: “Crisi del sistema creditizio... Ho trovato una bolla dentro una crisi, un buco pieno di vuoto”. Nel film, le parole perdono il loro significato e divengono contenitori vuoti, riempiti di altri significati o completamente svuotati di senso. *Everything That Is Solid...* concepito, scritto e girato prima che Lehman Brothers dichiarasse bancarotta il 15 settembre 2008, il film è tanto preveggente quanto inquisitorio. Ma, sebbene si concentri sull’attuale crisi finanziaria, il film in realtà si occupa più in generale dei tipi di astrazioni e di speculazioni che stanno alla base sia della cultura sia dell’economia contemporanee all’inizio del Ventunesimo Secolo. Per tutta la durata di *Crisis...* Gilligan sembra essere sempre consapevole della sottile linea che separa la trasmissione d’informazioni e la narrazione di storie, prima di tentare, nell’episodio finale, una critica di entrambe. In una performance precedente, *The Miner’s Object* (2006), l’artista ha anche contrapposto l’“arte” della narrazione di storie all’“atto” di veicolare informazioni e ha rivelato con quanta facilità l’una possa trasformarsi nell’altro e viceversa. Servendosi di una *mise en abyme* teatrale, *The Miner’s Object* si propone di indicare quali siano i limiti della performatività. Nella performance un’attrice legge un testo, scritto dall’artista, che racconta la storia dell’omonimo minatore e del suo tentativo di raccontare una storia al suo supervisore. Il supervisore, dal canto suo, racconta anch’egli una storia, e poi vi sono altre storie dentro le storie. Guardando il pubblico attraverso lo schermo di vetro trasparente di due gobbi (del tipo di quelli usati dai politici e dalle celebrità durante le cerimonie di premiazione per dare l’illusione che i loro discorsi siano pronunciati a braccio), l’attrice legge il testo facendo sfoggio delle sue migliori capacità attoriali. Comincia citando Benjamin sull’arte di narrare storie quando scrive “non mira a trasmettere la sostanza dell’evento nel modo in cui lo fa un’informazione o un resoconto”. *The Miner’s Object* procede nella simultanea dimostrazione e confutazione di questo punto. Una simile sala degli specchi è costruita nella performance *Prairie, Year 215* (2006), che tratta di un argomento a cui Gilligan torna continuamente: le interpretazioni del significato culturale e politico della Rivoluzione Francese. Due personaggi – un avvocato in abito formale e un artista contemporaneo in pigiama – raccontano storie e si scambiano opinioni. L’artista esprime le proprie rimostranze all’“avvocato esperto di proprietà intellettuale”, ma nessuno dei due personaggi mantiene una posizione stabile per quanto concerne il lascito della rivoluzione. L’artista, alla fine di un lungo discorso su come le persone, allora come oggi, siano state costrette a consegnare il potere nelle mani di rappresentanti, afferma che “ci mettiamo a sedere e stiamo a guardare mentre i politici recitano davanti a noi. Un po’ come a teatro”. Nei lavori di Gilligan, gli attori recitano spesso ruoli inseriti dentro altri ruoli, occupando posizioni diverse, mentre una sovrastruttura appena dissimulata ne detta i comportamenti e li tiene al loro posto. È la sovrastruttura che l’artista cerca di portare alla luce, e occasionalmente la chiama con il suo nome: l’*economia globale*, lo *stato neoliberale post-fordista* o, semplicemente, il *capitalismo*. E anche l’artista ha una parte da recitare in questo *Theatrum Mundi*, su cui riflette – l’attrice di una storia nella storia.



Prison for Objects, 2008-2009. Courtesy: the artist and SculptureCenter, New York. Photo: Jason Mandella.



Melanie Gilligan, Popular Unrest, 2010, film still

Melanie Gilligan
Chisenhale
7/5-15/7

Melanie Gilligan's new film series 'Popular Unrest' follows 'Crisis in the Credit System', an acutely observed four-part mini-drama with a twist, during which the participants of a corporate training workshop act out possible post-crunch scenarios, including one where the English language itself is bastardised into a new commodifiable form. Systems of value and exchange remain key to her enquiry, as does the written word as critical and narrative tool. Gilligan's new, highly technologised nanny state, in which individuals amass and bond for no particular reason and poor people are used as fuel, sounds a bit 'Dr Who' but in fact owes more to US TV shows, such as 'Bones', 'CSI' and the dystopian stylistics of David Cronenberg. Chisenhale will screen five films from the series and these 'episodes' will be made available to view online.



Still from 'My Funeral Song'

Breda Beban
Camden Arts Centre
11/5-5/9

Subtle gestures and approaches to very different media link the artists showing at Camden this summer. The gallery will host the first UK retrospective of American artist Jim Hodges, who makes highly delicate drawings and sculptures with everyday and precious materials, often derived from his personal experiences of love and loss in the natural-world scheme of things. Breda Beban, meanwhile, describes the politics of love and life on the fringes through very personal stories. The London-based artist has also in the past drawn from her own social history as a citizen of the former Yugoslavia, through film and photography. Beban's new five-channel filmwork on the emotional capacity of music, 'My Funeral Song', brings together a group of her close friends to contemplate death: the perspectives on life and the future thereafter the issue provokes.



Tacita Dean, Craneway Event, 2009
16mm colour anamorphic film, optical sound
1 hour 48 mins

Tacita Dean
Frith Street Gallery
13/5-27/6

The late Merce Cunningham, pioneer dancer, choreographer and key figure of the American avant garde collaborated with many innovators across the arts spectrum during his 90 years: from Robert Rauschenberg (who designed the early object-sets of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company) and John Cage (Cunningham's partner in every sense until his death in 1992) from the Black Mountain College days to Sonic Youth, Bruce Nauman and Andy Warhol. This film project with Tacita Dean was to be his last. Dean had just begun editing footage for 'Craneway Event' (the product of several days spent with Cunningham and his dancers in San Francisco Bay in November 2008) last year when news came of his death. This is one in a series of recent 'film portraits' made by the British artist, who is known for her historically rooted explorations of human emotions and habitats filmed on 16mm. The predominantly glass Alfred Khan building provides the port-side backdrop to this study of human movement through space and a master at work.

Robert Clark

Melanie Gilligan: Popular Unrest, London

Melanie Gilligan's 2008 online film, *Crisis In The Credit System*, was unnervingly timely. Made just before the recession hit, it tackled the world of hedge fund managers and financial analysts. The young Canadian-born artist's latest work envisions an even darker future, following the logic of capitalism to a grim, absurd conclusion. In a world governed by a system called "the spirit", mankind is reduced to physical needs: an invisible serial killer dispatches victims in public places; diet foods eat weight-watchers from the inside. It makes for a prescient fusion of cultural mores, politics and paranoia, from TV drama's fixation on violence and forensic procedure to economic decline.

Chisenhale Gallery, E3, to 20 Jun

Skye Sherwin

Maeve Rendle, Blackpool

Maeve Rendle takes the inspiration for this her first solo show from a line in Marcel Proust's reflection on the nature of memory *In Search of Lost Time*: "I could not help being saddened by the fact that there was now nothing left of my former frame of mind." Rendle's installation adds up to a series of intimations of absence. Nails mark the position of empty frames. Unframed photographs present fragmentary evidence of time passing. The structure of the of the overall work is continually discomposed and recomposed. This is art in a tentative state of constant self-reflection and flux. And what an admirable and adventurous show for the dear old Grundy to stage as the Blackpool tourist season truly kicks off.

The Grundy Gallery, to 5 Jun

Robert Clark

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ART LATEST

Melanie Gilligan

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Film still from 'Popular Unrest', 2010, by Melanie Gilligan - Commissioned and produced by Chisenhale Gallery, London, Kolnischer Kuntsverein, Cologne, Walter Philips Gallery, The Banff Centre, Banff and Presentation House, North Vancouver. Supported by Franco Soffiantino Gallery, Turin.

Time Out says

By Martin Coomer

Posted: Mon May 17 2010

Melanie Gilligan's five-episode drama, 'Popular Unrest' (also viewable online at www.popularunrest.org) promises a riot but delivers a thesis. The action takes place during a time of 60 per cent unemployment in a post-industrial, partially inhabited landscape where, because of their apparently unpremeditated union, a group of culturally diverse but uniformly downtrodden people begin to think of themselves as being special.

Their story - a quest for enlightenment - is set against a backdrop of alienating extremes: on one level, human needs are eclipsed by the pursuit of profit, on another, knife crime has become so arbitrary that it borders on the cartoon. The weather isn't very good. Sounds familiar? It doesn't require mirror-touch synesthesia, or hyper-empathy, or whatever the hell it is that Gilligan's 'grouping' thinks its sense of connection might be called in order to recognise their predicament.

As they journey towards a fateful meeting with 'the Spirit' - a supercomputer 'measuring device for social interactions', we're told, but you can easily substitute the system, the Man, God or oblivion - various questions about 'them and us', the abstract mechanisms and 'higher beings' that govern us, the motives of their earthly representatives and the nature of both our fears and our deference begin to surface. The darkest moments, during episodes of technical/new age/quasi-corporate jargon and Kafkaesque knots of officialdom, are those that most accurately reflect everyday life. But Gilligan's studiously distorted world is really no match for the baroque world of grotesque distortion we call home. As art, it just feels too compliant. [Less](#)

Who's going? (No one has said they're going... yet)



You?

Are you going?

Chisenhale Gallery details

[Chisenhale Gallery](#) ,
64 Chisenhale Rd, London, E3 5QZ
Transport Mile End

Wed-Sun 1-6pm

Telephone
020 8981 4518

something sticky about this work – as in tacky glue – that keeps you looking in an attempt to assemble the disparate clues into a narrative that appears desultory but clearly isn't. In *Marilyn with Wall*, 2010, a couple of large, ragged MDF walls, cut from another white cube and studded with screws, lean against the gallery's walls. A black and white photograph of a photograph of Marilyn Monroe being tissue-wrapped is hung on it like an afterthought. Harrison reconfigures the word 'hang', letting materials and objects from high and low culture hang out together, puncturing the walls of the museum or gallery as marketplace, as neutral podium.

While previously Harrison used strewn straw more immersively, here over 30 bales are stacked as a piece, as if to signal the rural work done by someone else in a place we only visit. Or is it a joke on what we visit the gallery for: fodder? In *Haycation*, 2009, a truncated figure, wearing a crocheted shawl and holding up a stick fitted with an Adidas tennis shoe, is placed on a multi-coloured sculptural block atop two straw bales. The face is the photo of a man attired in a mosquito head net and armed with a fishing rod. This transgendered ex-urban volunteer also carries a silver lobster – looking for Dali or David Foster Wallace? – clothed in a fluorescent safety vest. But s/he can't run away. Imagine Duane Hanson's *Tourists* defaced and amputated and zoomed into the 21st century.

In *Indigenous Parts, V*, 2010, vandals have got inside the shop window and mucked around with merchandise from different departments – disjunctive aesthetic worlds – all the while keeping a metallic Sharpie marker pen at the ready for the latest discount sign. Scuffed plinths and crates borrowed from various London museums are cobbled into a warehouse wall that resembles the closing-down sale of an odds and sods shop in a recession-hit town. This altar to the miscellany of fashion and failure, with its posters of Mel Gibson and Cher, its flea-market nudes, its Harrison sculptures hanging out on stepladders and under string vests, is accompanied by the sound of selling from a video of a Fleischmann's auction in upstate New York. The US recycling its stale dream works well close to Brick Lane, with its transient fabric shops and immigrant populations.

The show tilts from vulgarity to hard-nosed pathos, leaving an artificial flavour. It swells and swerves like a list in an auction catalogue or the bewildering itemisation in a John Ashbery poem. Anything goes, is going, is gone ... In *The Eagle has landed*, 2006, the US has become a bald eagle pillowcase shroud draped over a Harrison-made bulk, which is laid on its side on a piece of wood on rollers. Harrison is suspicious of her sculptures standing alone. She undermines their status, their right to be displayed, by placing them in conversation with other works of art, with tat and with packaging, so that they misbehave and will not acquiesce to a neat museum afterlife. Sometimes they speechify rather than interrogate. The newly renovated Whitechapel seems inured to her eclectic charms. From establishment to classical is a tiny step, even in those bronze high heels. ■

CHERRY SMYTH is a critic, curator and poet.

■ Melanie Gilligan: Popular Unrest

Chisenhale Gallery London 7 May to 20 June

References come thick and fast. The press release mentions US television dramas *CSI*, *Dexter* and *Bones*, as well as David Cronenberg's 'body horror'. One could add *Lost*, recent British television dramas *Survivors* and *Being Human*, films such as Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later*, Hitchcock's *Psycho* and George A Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*, to name but a few. Melanie Gilligan's new film, *Popular Unrest*, a fictional docudrama in five episodes that straddles genres of horror and sci-fi, is presented at the Chisenhale on five separate monitors in booth-like structures divided by office screens and plastic dividers, an installation format that echoes the kinds of spaces in the film, especially the sites where forensic investigation of the protagonists' emotions and bodily gestures are conducted by a team of scientists.

The episodes follow on one from the other, although, given that some are slightly longer than others, the viewer occasionally enters a booth some way into an episode, a factor which mirrors televisual viewing in domestic space. Like any of the aforementioned cult dramas, *Popular Unrest* incites anticipation for the next instalment. Unlike televisual viewing, you don't have to wait until the following week to pick up on the mini cliff-hanger that ends each episode. Expanding the connection to televisual viewing, the episodes can also be viewed online, as with Gilligan's previous work, *Crisis in the Credit System*, 2008, which was commissioned by Artangel Interaction specifically to be viewed online (Reviews AM321).

Popular Unrest explores whether there is any aspect of human life and interaction which escapes the technological and disciplinary measuring systems characteristic of late capitalism. The film is set in a future similar to now except that paper has been done away with and the incursion into 'bios' by capital has occurred to such a degree that all emotional needs and desires are measured and evaluated by computerised systems that feed into an overarching system called 'the Spirit'. On the surface, everything appears stable and coolly clinical. People work out in gyms, they work in banks and call centres making money and monitoring the bodily weight, energies and sleep patterns of the population at large, but random murders disrupt this smooth efficiency. We see no killer, just the violent stabbing of a knife into sacks of blood-like liquid, which is nonetheless nauseatingly suggestive.

The protagonists of the film are gradually introduced to us by a documentary voiceover: a group of people, a good representative cross-section of London's urban population, who have been telepathically drawn to an abandoned warehouse. They feel a strong connection to one another that they develop using team bonding games which were popular in the 1970s and which have found currency today in both corporate awaydays and self-organising cultural groupings – at times, I thought the film was an allegorical critique of these latter. Creepily, the role-plays of emotional trauma that they re-enact with a seemingly benign desire for connection is precisely how 'the Spirit' (the capitalist machine?) operates in a global economy where it infiltrates our bodies to analyse and predict our appetites in order to propagate the system of productive desire and demand. The group members give themselves over to having their affective and phenomenal embodiments studied and experimented with by the team of scientists high

up in the pecking order in an effort to better understand the workings of 'the Spirit'. No good comes of this.

It becomes apparent to the group, one of many reported as occurring across the globe, that they have some relation to the killings after two of them have empathetic seizures while watching people on the tube being stabbed by the invisible perpetrator. Apparently, the logic of 'the Spirit' system is that once it has reached a certain level of glut, it is necessary to eradicate some data, transforming it into the raw meat that underlies the concept of the body as a mere conglomeration of neural transmitters that can be redirected with the right chemicals or under the right scientific conditions; the allegorical dimension of *Popular Unrest* expands.

The final episode has the group joining with 'the Spirit' in a stabbing frenzy which they survive in 'Spirit heaven', evading the violent protests of the large numbers of people unable to access the protection of 'the Spirit'. It is difficult to see where hope lies in this film, which is a quite brilliant mirror of the logic of affective labour demanded of us in capitalism and the dynamic of group contagion which capitalism feeds off. In an *Artforum* article in 2007, Gilligan critiqued Catherine Sullivan's film *The Chittendens*, 2005, for not opening up a political dimension but simply offering 'the spectacular mirror image of a post-Fordist demand for frequent and surplus transformation'. One might accuse Gilligan of doing the same. While it is naive to think that there is an outside to a system which has nightmarishly reached into our dreams – as Edward L Bernays, Freud's nephew, predicted – one always hopes that the mirror art holds up to society will produce a stain rather than a jacked-in image.

Popular Unrest intelligently shows that the body and the subconscious can no longer be thought of as sites of resistance as they might have been in the modern era. The subconscious, as Gilligan wrote in the script for *Crisis in the Credit System*, is the most powerful network processor known to man, hence 'the Spirit's interest in tapping its energies for profit. *Popular Unrest's* ending is ambiguous, though. While the killings do not stop, the group concludes that 'we' have created 'the Spirit' in our own image. They choose to return to 'the Spirit', but perhaps there are

other possibilities? Gilligan's acute diagnosis, in the guise of a cracking yarn, inserts some pressing questions into the hardware. ■

MARIA WALSH is a writer and BA FA theory leader at Chelsea College of Art & Design.

■ Heiner Goebbels: I Went To The House But Did Not Enter

Barbican London 28 April to 1 May

The experience of written material as a private, or again personal matter, could perhaps be treated as a presumption on the part of the individual reader, supplanting the 'I' before the text itself. Why should the act of reading be ranked more favourably in the form of a solo enterprise, rather than as a group activity? How may texts enacted off the page be 'read'? Where should we start?

I Went To The House But Did Not Enter is a staged concert, constructed around four 20th-century literary works and linked by Aristotle's classical unities of action, place and time. Sequenced chronologically in three hyperreal, full-scale tableaux, German composer and director Heiner Goebbels worked with British male vocal quartet the Hilliard Ensemble to sing through each text in full, generating a polyvocal circuit of aural ontology.

TS Eliot's *The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock* (a poem famous enough to be known simply as *Prufrock*) was imagined as metaleptic reorganisations of the sparse contents of a room which looked as though the Stasi had only just vacated it. Monochrome domestic objects, such as two sets of cups and saucers, a pair of curtains and a vase, were carefully wrapped and packed by the four members of the Hilliard Ensemble, then unwrapped and unpacked to no discernable effect.

The flat sadness of Eliot's poem is bluntly evoked in this pointless inversion of white cup to black cup, which was delivered in silence for the first ten minutes of the tableau, accompanied only by the brittle clink clink clink of porcelain: 'Time for you and time for me / And time yet for a hundred

Melanie Gilligan
installation view



Election-night get-togethers are always a good way to ruin an evening: tense, television-orientated affairs, they're the most fraught kind of event that people still dare call a party. Because, whatever the circumstances, election nights are always an apprehensive period of limbo between two soon-to-be discrete periods – the nervous fun is in the waiting for a verdict on the first of these, which decides the shape of the second. I'm writing a day after the first coalition government since 1945 has been formed in the UK. For those with an eye on arts funding, details on cultural policy are unusually scant; prospects are bleak. But I'd guess that the arts are considered by some to be a niche interest for a country that has had its longest period of sustained economic growth since records began, followed by its longest-ever period of sustained economic contraction. I doubt 2010 is a vintage year for election parties.

Television's continued importance to election night produces the kind of community of viewers that, *X Factor*-style shows aside, rarely coalesces around live events anymore. Many watch the same things on the same channels unfold at the same time. But this was an election lacking a single star performance; one in which the complexity of the key issues – the national deficit and the threat of economic breakdown – was difficult to properly visualize. It's not surprising that few artists have tried tackling the subject. As Dan Fox wrote on the *frieze* editors' blog last October: 'In the absence of visual subject matter that might inspire a latter-day Walker Evans or Dorothea Lange [...] how can today's artists make work about the relative abstraction of the current economic recession?' Does image (and information) saturation on the one hand and the dauntingly abstract nature of financialization on the other mean an impasse for artists drawn to the complexities of politics?

As well as providing a highly-strung pause, the oddities of election night might also be a means to focus. Skip back to

November 1988; it's the end of an American presidential race – between George H.W. Bush and Michael Dukakis – that has been defined by a new level of television-led spectacle. We're in New York, where Group Material's 'Democracy: Politics and Election' is showing at Dia Art Foundation. Decked with all the festive trimmings of a televised election rally, the gallery looks set for a party: hundreds of red, white and blue balloons cover the ceiling; caterers mix drinks in matching colours; a television tuned to major network campaign coverage sits by the entrance. The atmosphere is uneasy; as the press release notes, the exhibition looks like 'a perversely patriotic party gone wrong'. It's characteristic of Group Material to harness the queasy set-up of an election party as the framework for a show: where else – amidst tired news anchors, tears and unscripted victories – are the mechanics and artifice of mainstream broadcasting stripped so bare? Keep watching live TV long enough and something interesting will happen.

Fast-forward 20 years to November 2008 and we're in another New York gallery on election night. At first glance the exhibition looks remarkably like the Dia show, only the mood is one of jubilant optimism rather than awkwardness. We are at the end of what's been touted as the first Internet-led presidential campaign, with important battles won and lost on YouTube, Facebook and Twitter. Despite this, it isn't computer monitors but two flat-screen televisions that hang back-to-back from the gallery ceiling, piping in CNN on one side and the Fox News Channel on the other. Televised coverage mediates a good deal of our election experience; indeed, this exhibition – by Jonathan Horowitz – presents rival news networks as being equally representative of political divisions as party colours. (A split carpet of red and blue accentuates the divide.) Although the gallery is separated down party lines, there is no ill feeling; the happy community of viewers is as partisan as you'd expect of a show titled – presumptuously, but

correctly – 'Obama '08'. Group Material's icy scepticism of patriotic baubles has thawed; rather than scrutinize proceedings at a remove, Horowitz earnestly embraces the spectacle of art-directed electioneering. As the hoped-for result is announced, the crowd cheers; red, white and blue balloons fall from the ceiling. *The Huffington Post* reports from the event: 'We were laughing because finally the dream was coming true [...] today we had a chance to be the best we can be.' Apparently critical distance doesn't mix well with long-held political views: individual judgement is replaced by unquestioning consensus.

Trudge on a further 18 months and we're back to the present. When the polls closed, I was in a gallery full of screens, only this time they weren't showing election coverage, but a new, five-part drama – *Popular Unrest* by Melanie Gilligan – that takes a markedly different approach to the problems of representing life in the aftermath of the financial crisis. (It's a little like satirical news show *Brass Eye* directed by David Cronenberg.) Filmed in London during the run-up to the election, *Popular Unrest* is set in a jittery near-future that is very much like the present, in which all social and financial transactions are overseen by a man-made system known as the Spirit. This version of the city is plagued by a spate of mysterious killings by knife-wielding invisible force; everyone is keenly aware of the absurdity of being at the prey of abstractions. (A character exclaims: 'Just our luck – we live in a totally rational world where they can't find a supernatural killer!') One group, who seem to be speaking in tongues, are actually channelling the language of commodities, shares and algorithms: such nefarious abstractions are inscribed on the whole population – a paranoid, election-night fantasia. Welcome to the world of complex finance – it's not pretty but, for the moment at least, it's not going away.

Sam Thorne is associate editor of frieze.

Political Parties

The mingling of art and elections *by Sam Thorne*