

The Walls Have Ears: Judy Radul's Lasting Phenomenology

Judy Radul creates immersive installations that play with our senses and as Mitch Speed aptly states, “the relationship through which the performing of life itself occurs.”

By Mitch Speed - July 29, 2020



Looking back over Judy Radul's work has felt like re-reading a favourite book. Familiar passages deepen, and the parts that were missed by a wandering or distracted mind suddenly pop out. I started following her work in 2009 as a student in Vancouver. At UBC's Belkin Art Gallery, she had installed “World Rehearsal Court”, a sprawling reflection of the theatrical and filmic nature of juridical processes, made from an installation of sculpture, surveillance apparatuses, photographs, theatre props, books, and more. Bewildered, I asked for an interview. The conversation that followed set a model for how art's effect can extend and evolve far past museum walls.

Words brought Judy into art. While working as art handlers around 2013, my colleagues and I were sorting the collection of a client who had been involved in Vancouver's punk scene. In a stack of prints, we found a poster for a concert from the punk group Pointed Sticks. Its margin contained an announcement for a spoken word performance that Judy would put on the same night. Those early language-based works soon brought her into contact with the Kootenay School of Writing, a self-organized institution of poets, which in 1984 took form in Vancouver after the closure of their previous home, Nelson's David Thomas University Centre. Subsequently, she developed a mode of performance that focused not on the direct conveyance of language, but—in an oddball structuralist sense—the relationships through which the performing of life itself occurs.



Featured image (top): Judy Radul, *In Relation to Objects*, 1999, 4 channel video installation, dimensions variable. Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver. Above: Judy Radul, *And So Departed (Again)* (still), 2003, 3 channel projection, DVD, 1 hour, 46 minutes. Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver.

To make the multi-channel video work *In Relation to Objects* (1999), Judy sat four actors, one after another, at a table. Each was given an object—a bar of soap, a coin, a hand towel, a glass bottle—and asked to spend a few minutes interacting with it. The resultant improvisations

played out within four small projector screens, placed on the gallery floor at staggered angles. Each unlikely performance became a downtempo weave of slapstick, made from the twitches and fidgets, caresses and squeezes, that comprise the bulk of our haptic experience. *In Relation to Objects* elaborated a mysterious sub-dimension of latent movement: one that plays out beneath life's more 'purposeful' activities. Combing your hair, say, or buttering toast.

A few years later, in *And So Departed (Again)* (2003), dark anxieties boiled within absurd horror. This piece was a study of the relationship between performing and directing bodies, as they are structured in cinema; and also, by implication, in our imaginations, as they are in turn structured by cinematic input. Viewed with attention to the subconscious, though, this piece emitted mortal apprehensions. On three projection screens, showing a living room set shot at close, medium, and long-range, directors and actors collaborated to produce scenes of sudden death. Gasping and thrashing, falling and stiffening, the actors repeatedly expired at the hands of some invisible culprit: heart attack, poison, demon... At the same time, the directors became agents of death. The banality of their lethal instruction only made the situation, and their elusive desire to kill, more sinister.



Judy Radul, *And So Departed (Again)* (still), 2003, 3 channel projection, DVD, 1 hour, 46 minutes. Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver.

Judy's own statements stay clear of deathly gravitas. Her artistic thinking was formed in a time and a place—1990s Vancouver, and later, New York State's Bard College—where theory's power in art was at its apex. Analytical and structural, albeit in a freewheeling kind of way, her words circumscribe the psychological, perceptual and social relationship between director, actor, spectator, screen, camera, theatre. Yet, so much of her content exceeds these technical concerns. And so, I've come to understand the technical nature of these descriptions as a necessary parameter. Within her plotted conceptual and technical structures, unwieldy meanings lurk, like silhouettes on an illuminated sheet.

After *And So Departed (Again)*, spirits of law and order seem to have taken hold of the work. They were especially palpable in *Set Room 302*, a 2005 collaboration with Geoffrey Farmer, which delivered viewers into a realm between cinema and life. Now the work's catalyzing tension took form between the material reality of a place and the real artificiality of all places. In the Vancouver Art Gallery, a former courthouse, there remains one room that maintains its juridical appearance and is often rented out as a film set. Therein, Judy and Geoffrey installed a polyphonic echo of the room's former and lasting function. A video projection played scripted legal proceedings in which characters cycled positions, becoming thespian shapeshifters. The video's audio emitted from surround sound speakers; it seemed that the walls, which must have seen so much, really could talk. Scattered props, stacked pieces, and false courtroom architecture awaited their own dramatic reanimation. For their part, Judy and Geoffrey operated like human amplifiers of this space's nested simulacral character; an art gallery, which is a house of aesthetic judgement, within the edifice of a court, which is a house of legal judgements, both drawing their power from imposing architecture, itself as theatrical as anything.



Judy Radul and Geoffrey Farmer, *Room 302*, 2005, courtroom furnishings and DVD projection. Installation view, Set: Room 302, Artspeak, Vancouver, Canada, 2005.
 Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver.

Sometimes, because Judy's works seem almost anthropological or forensic, I've found myself waiting for clear meaning—a verdict. It is a misguided expectation. What her work really does, is cast re-enactment and re-creation into expanded sculpture. This form's effect is to produce a relationship of many conversant facets, interlocking elements of fragmented literary information, surface, and kinetic mechanisms. Skilfully executed, this mode of sculpture sends a viewer's combined physical and cerebral attention into novel, elliptical pathways. This effect makes the work into a living allegory, for the chronically under-examined strangeness of our perceptual and cognitive relation to the world. This is an effect not endemic to Judy's work. But her particular technique produces the feeling of being prodded here and there by an invisible, cheeky puppeteer.

Restlessly, she has sought out new methods and technologies. "World Rehearsal Court" signified a bold gambit into a type of phenomenological sculpture that was at once unwieldy and weightlessly precise; unwieldy in its variety of objects, signifiers, technologies, and image types, with multi-channel video screens showing courtroom re-enactments, endless props both sculpted and found, books, and photographs; precise in the placement of these things, which

ushered but never pushed a viewer's body and gaze, and in the finely-tuned surveillance apparatus that transmitted mise-en-scène into a bank of screens. It was like walking through a multiplex consciousness.



Judy Radul and Geoffrey Farmer, *Room 302*, 2005, courtroom furnishings and DVD projection. Installation view, Set: Room 302, Artspeak, Vancouver, Canada, 2005.
Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver.

In 2017, this consciousness showed up in Rotterdam at the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art. In “The King, The Door, The Thief, The Window, The Stranger, The Camera”, Judy’s language of props and technological systems took a more fantastical form. The installation was an uncanny, fragmented entity. You couldn’t always find the work’s titular characters in the installation. Instead, evidence of their presence emanated from a choreography of static and animatronic objects; here, a flock of white china birds atop black poles; there, a book splayed open and encased within an orange apparatus, shaped like an amber cast rainbow. There were doors and quasi-architectural screens. Sometimes, these divisions were interrupted by a disembodied hand, or butterfly. A broad face smeared on glass looked like the shroud of Turin or a clumsy cat-burglar’s calling card. Pink window blinds rolled up and down, their ghostly movement counterpointed by a mechanical page-turning

device, which read a magazine, clunky but autonomous. All of these things and more converged within real-time surveillance footage, channelled into many screens.

Owing to the phenomenological gestalt of Judy's installations and exhibitions—their mimicry of perceptions divided and braided between sensuality, language, space, sound, narrative—there is significance in the density with which the phenomena within them cycle through a viewer's own perception. Finely tuned resonances and counterpoints activate that flow, give it form, voice. In the absence of embodied viewers, her video documentation transmits all of this. Watching a video of “The King, The Door, The Thief, The Window, The Stranger, The Camera” on Judy's website, I felt the images twitch to life. This strange pleasure contrasted the deadness of so many video documents, produced to archival ends, or as whimsical promo pieces. Its transitions between silence and sound were nimble and droll. You could sense the art itself, negotiating jarring psychological transitions. When us humans are looking, it's all warm and fuzzy. When we leave, the objects wait out long silences.



Judy Radul, *World Rehearsal Court*, 2009, 7 monitor video installation and various sculptural components, dimensions variable. Installation view, *World Rehearsal Court*, Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, Høvikodden, Norway, 2011.

Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver.

This video may not have been the art, exactly. But it wasn't not the art, either. Judy's work has always opened gaps like that—slippages that receive much lip service in art writing but rarely take believable form. Inside of them, odd, colourful, unexpected things unfold. The point has never been to debunk authenticity or perception. That drama lost its charge long ago. Now, It's all about tinkering and playing with reality's unending productions and re-productions.

Mitch Speed is an artist and writer based in Berlin. His book Mark Leckey: Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore, about Leckey's 1999 work of that title, was published by Afterall Books in Autumn 2019. In September 2019, his solo exhibition 'Permanent Head' was presented at Wil Aballe Art Projects, in Vancouver.' He contributes to several publications, including Frieze, Mousse, Momus, and Camera Austria.