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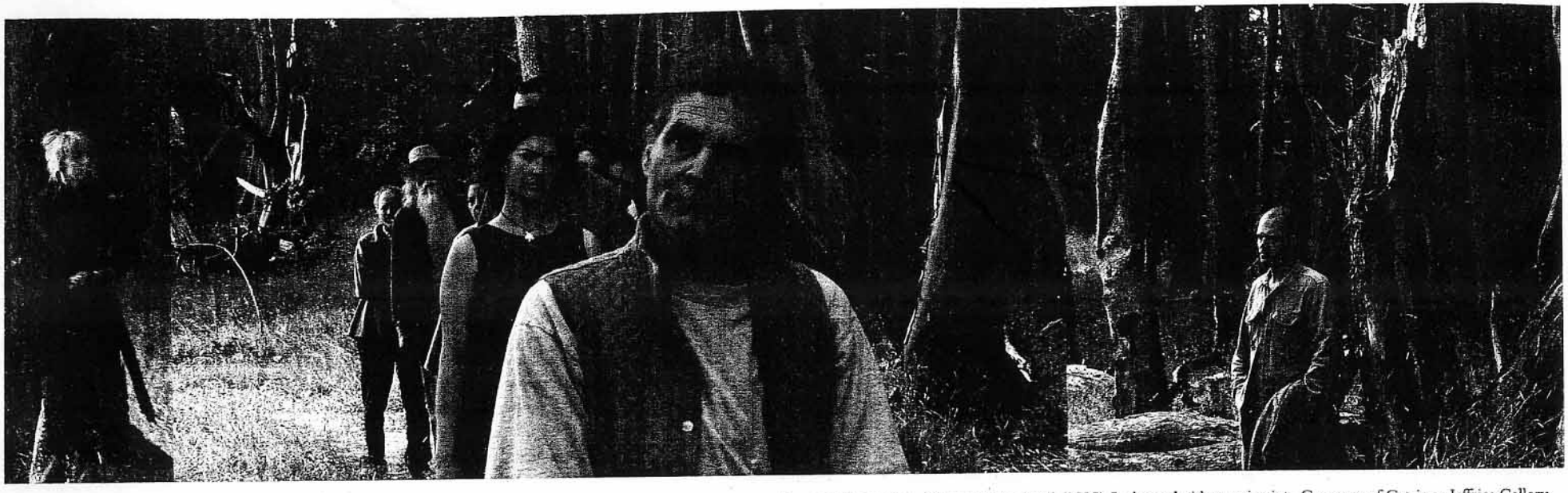
THE FILLIP REVIEW: volume one, number two (winter 2006)
Published in Vancouver under the auspices of the Projectile Publishing Society
ISSN 1715-3212 :: $4.50CDN $4US $5AUD $35HKD €3EURO ¥500JPY £3UK



above JUDY RADUL, *Downes Point,* detail (2005) 5-channel video projection. Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries Gallery
below JUDY RADUL, Diagram for *Downes Point.* Courtesy of the artist

Szewczyk, Monika. "Departures from Death." *Fillip 2* (The Fillip Review, winter 2006). p.1,5.

Departures from Death

MONIKA SZEWCZYK

Judy Radul: Downes Point and So Departed (Again) at the Presentation House Gallery
September 17 - October 30, 2005

It could be said that contemporary art lives off death—the death of painting, the avant-garde, irony, and (doubtlessly soon) relational aesthetics—to name a few of the current preoccupations. Or I should specify that it is the ghosts of paintings' past, the unfinished avant-gardes, and their furtive, regicidal ironies that continue to haunt current art production. Judy Radul's two multiple-projection video works, on view at Presentation House Gallery in North Vancouver, could be seen as paradigmatic in this respect as they deal so clearly with death and the departed. But to stop there, with the fact of Radul's dealing with death and afterlife, could miss the unique aspect of her practice; namely, a notion of *experimenting with the world* that seems in short supply today.[1] This notion of experiment, an open encounter with the world I detect in Radul's practice, is often foreclosed by the all too melancholy death drives of contemporary art (not to mention the lively but lame forms of participation that many relational works politely enforce). Radul's route to experiment is virtually free of the prevailing nostalgia for too hastily consumed artistic vanguards or some coming notions of community because it primarily interrogates presence. Even when she stages her experiments in the most romantic of settings, her work is not grounded in the fond, disarming recognition that so often links subjectivities. Infused with an undecided quality, the work foregrounds

continued on page 5

Szewczyk — *con't*

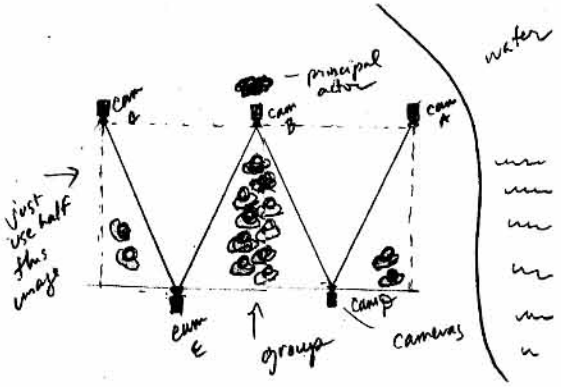
our confrontation with common concepts that remain abstract (such as nature, death and the base materiality of objects). And by introducing a kind of obscurity, a slightly cryptic quality to the identity of subjects through the processes of rehearsal and audition (as provisional activities that embody a changing mind), what she may be said to advance is an abstraction without the memory of Malevich (or at least without the mere/misguided worship of his monochrome as an icon).

If abstraction was once deployed by the Suprematists and Constructivists to pave the way for change in their world, these particular geometries may no longer hold the revolutionary sway, having long ago become part of the nostalgic canon. But what if the abstractions of yesteryears are (in sly *samizdat* style) masked in representation? Although I suspect that Judy Radul's work is not *bound for* social revolution—true experiments being by definition without bounds—her art continues to foreground the bare geometries that in turn animate, expose and open up already improvisational behavior.

In her latest work, *Downes Point* (2005), the viewer is implicated in a precise geometry of viewing. Three projectors on the one side and two on the other cast two corresponding panoramic-views onto two facing walls. On one of these panoramic images, a motley company of characters assembles in a sublime arbutus grove on Hornby Island, situated within a two hour, three ferry drive and ferry trip from Vancouver. This group of individuals wait, listen, and then respond to the existential musing and elemental instructions of a man with the gait of a stage director (played by the only professional actor on the set). He is seen on the opposite wall amidst more arbutus trees, recorded by another two cameras that were pointed in the opposite direction. The forest space is thereby almost entirely "covered," as they would say in cinema or the newsroom. Five cameras produce two composite panoramic views recast on two facing walls by five similarly distributed projectors inside the gallery (see diagram). By entering the space where *Downes Point* is projected, viewers inhabit a rectilinear field completed by two benches placed perpendicular to the two parallel screens. We're back to the square then, although the scene is not recognizably constructivist. The gnarly trees and the fifteen figures assembled amongst them have a downright Shakespearian quality that contradicts the ultra-modernity of the equipment (and the modern suit of the director), without irritating the eye.

Indeed, this is arguably Radul's most picturesque work to date. A lucky light has distinguished the ancient trees, the midsummer grasses and the pleasant, wholesome, sometimes funny features of the fifteen Hornby Island dwellers cast for the scene. Adding to the magic is the sound of an eagle's call, somewhere in the distance, just in time to answer the director's first words: "Who's there?" That the first line of *Downes Point* rehearses the first line spoken in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* testifies to Radul's ongoing dialogue with dramaturgy, particularly the conventions of staging that intersect with existential and phenomenological questions. An earlier work, not part of the current exhibition, entitled *In Relation to Objects* (1999), where four people interact abstractly with a coin, a towel, soap and a green glass bottle, is paradigmatic of her interest in the basic, phenomenological interaction between people and things. Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the lyric laboratory of Francis Ponge's *Soap* loom large here. While these philosophical directions are often denigrated along similar critical terms that currently confront notions of beauty (i.e. as too abstract or too arrogantly universal), Radul's experiments remain open to these ontological fields of inquiry without fetishizing their most enigmatic terms of engagement with the world.

Beauty, here, is in part an apt agent of concealment and, in part, a kind of truth (the truth of the picture). Or it may be said that within the beautiful setting of *Downes Point*, the notion of concealment, which becomes explicit when the "director" announces that he is looking for someone who is "not here, who doesn't exist," paradoxically helps to activate the eye. The promise of some (impossible?) spectral appearance is not so much romantic as it is speculative—as is made evident in the fact that as he sends them off, the director randomly assigns material designations to the cast-members: cardboard, water vapour, oil, an onion, mirror, wax, wood, smoke and, yes, soap. It is as if Radul is hoping to loosen our ties to their form as predetermined subjects. This unhinged reality is perhaps most economically asserted when the director takes off his suit jacket and hangs it on a tree as if he had just entered a waiting room, at which point he is most out of joint with the landscape (he is Radul's secret agent, the man who makes this natural setting strange). Why some of these individuals satisfy the director in terms of "not being" is forever concealed, but some are evidently



less "there" than others. To the second person that comes before him, a tallish graying and attractive woman, he responds: "you're not here" and then more enthusiastically "you're still not here!" She and two other men are asked to move "to the left" of the panorama and into the field of the left-hand projection. The rest are directed to veer right towards a kind of waiting area that the tree formations, captured by the right hand camera, provide. By the end of the sequence, all assembled in the view of the central camera have been redistributed to the fields covered by the cameras on the left and the right of the centre.

While posing the enigmatic, ontological question of "not being," Radul gives the optical geometry of the cameras a dramatic function, making photographic technology into an existential apparatus in the tradition of critical modernity. As each extra crosses one of two seams between the three aligned camera views, his or her figure briefly breaks down. Ditto for the "director." On his side, composed by two camera-views, a limb occasionally appears from within the single seam, making visible the lines of convergence between all five cameras. The choreography deliberately reveals the multiple projections that compose the two facing panoramas. A breakdown of the "total visibility" that is (as Kaja Silverman has discussed in her writing on Jeff Wall) falsely promised by the western notion of the picture is here enacted within the space of an audition, bringing to the foreground the tension and mutual provocations of performance and the picture.

A lot more could be written about this tension and how it inflects the life of experiment in art making. Suffice it to say here that Judy Radul is among the few artists in Vancouver who confronts this tension and its experimental potential directly. Her move from live performance to photography and video has resulted in works that infuse recorded images with the unpredictable character of live performance. By recording the "behind the scenes" processes of rehearsal, audition, entrances and exits or acts of improvisation, Radul presses the yet-to-be-determined character of the visual record. Consider that, in the Presentation House exhibition, the audition of *Downes Point* is paired with *And So Departed (Again)*—a three part projection of a rehearsal, whose multiple (wide, middle and close) static views fail to contain the action they are set to cover. This action involves five directors rehearsing one actress in a death scene, a process that splits her subject and makes evident that something parallel to the death drive has been a central trope of Radul's dealings with the camera. Each director instructs the actress to die a different death, from shock and fear to the peaceful passing. Death or ghostliness is, therefore, not a transcendent or nihilistic limit, but an experimental limit for the live body. In this way, the work is set up for failure (an impossibility of representing) which can, in the case of *Downes Point* become a little confusing. Though this willingness to fail is in large part what makes Radul's work worthy of discussion within the placid landscape of contemporary art, her clues are not always clear. Some may find it difficult to venture, as I have, that in this lastest work we are in fact searching for specters.

If the existential thrust of *And So Departed (Again)* locates the actress and directors in a kind of Sartrian closed room, Radul's newest work becomes somewhat more complicated because it brings home its existential point on *Downes Point*; that is to say, with specific reference to a local landscape. For all the structural, technologically-driven aspects of this work, Radul's choice of location is anything but abstract. She selected an ancient and cherished piece of land that was no small feat to secure for the shoot; the use of a local cast (except for the director) doubtlessly weighed in her favour and also distinguishes her work from previous artistic ventures into this territory. A similarly sublime section of Hornby Island, this one located on the seashore of Helliwell Provincial Park, was previously used by Ian Wallace as the ground for *Lookout* (1979), another composite panorama that served as kind of deconstruction of the gaze in relation to landscape, and featured some of Vancouver's key artistic figures (among them Stan Douglas, Rodney Graham, Ken Lum, Jeff Wall and Colin Griffiths). The figures were shot separately and montaged onto the expansive background[2] so that they assume the ghostly character of people not-quite-there.

A place full of ghosts, *Downes Point* is well suited for the kind of primeval ground on which to stage the dramas of modern subjectivity. The question of "Who's there?" announces this directly. And this begs the further conclusion that the type of landscape that Radul's five cameras have covered is a kind of pressure point, not just for her, but also for many artists working in this city. If Wallace's image grafted an established constructivist aesthetic onto the sublime West Coast vista, populating it with city types and their active eyes (which could be said to constitute them as active I's), then Judy Radul's approach relies on an all together different art history, one where theatre plays an important role and the technology of video, which some say killed live performance, is consciously redeployed to stage the drama of an after-life.

Notes

1. This dearth is not, I suspect, due to some abstract lack of demand in the market—such reasoning would be to misread the market's flexibility—but it may have something to do with a continuous failure of the imagination in the face of marketable art.

2. Jeff Wall's division of regional art making into island art (the romantics and the hippies) and city art (the counter tradition) is partly made in reference to Hornby Island, which has been the stomping ground for some of B.C.'s noted potters, such as Wayne Ngan, and sculptors, such as Tom Burrows, not to mention the late Jack Shadbolt—all artists whose "organic" ethos Wall critiques as an escape from the city and from the germane issues of cosmopolitan culture. See Jeff Wall, "Four Essays on Ken Lum" in *Ken Lum* (Rotterdam: Witte de With, 1990), 39. Ian Wallace is perhaps more ambiguously tied to both poles.

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