

Judy Radul's *World Rehearsal Court*: Trial Run

by Scott Watson

Judy Radul's *World Rehearsal Court* is the culmination of several years of research into the relationship between the contemporary courtroom, where video plays an increasing role—not just as a record of the court proceedings, but as evidence—and the possibilities of live-feed cameras in installations. The ambiguities of the title (does “rehearsal” modify “world” or “court”?) bring forward a notion of theatricality. The theatricality of a court proceeding is the subject of recent scholarship in the history and theory of law. Theatricality is also a vexed and contested concept in modernist criticism of visual art. Michael Fried's famous 1967 critique of minimalist sculpture found fault with that art's “theatricality,” in which the viewer becomes performer and becomes somatically aware or “theatrical” rather than absorbed and contemplative.¹ Fried's analysis has continued to resonate in a way he did not intend: the “theatrical” that he condemned has been the ground for artistic exploration for the past forty or so years. The term “court procedure” involves the idea of rehearsal as a trial run that includes notions

of repeating and reciting underscored by the need for memory and fidelity to a text. But in Radul's *World Rehearsal Court*, as much as the viewer becomes performer, witness and detective, the apparatus on display is more than a court or a theatre.

World Rehearsal Court is a complex installation. Its detail far exceeds the narrative of the rehearsed, staged and taped reconstructions of sessions of World Court trials that are at its thematic core and suffuse its somewhat aleatory periphery. One could map the trajectory of issues such as justice and representation, language and law, human rights and post-colonialism—all issues proper to thinking about the World Court and the crimes it tries—and that mapping would lead to interpretation and commentary; however, there is a great deal of material in the installation's images, situations and encounters that could bring forward a whole panoply of other references (*Rashomon*, Brigitte Bardot, Facebook, phantom limbs, other court cases, post-modern poetics, to name just a few). While there is a relation between the two main compo-

nents of the installation, which is echoed in a third component in the main corridor of the Gallery, there are parts of the installation where the unfolding references seem to tend toward infinite regress. It would make sense, perhaps, to let go of the need to decipher while allowing curiosity to structure its own path in what is a kind of conceptual clue-strewn labyrinth. It is too tempting to expect the work to disclose an argued critique of the court and its media apparatus. Rather, this deeply dialectical work is an experiment in open form, where much depends upon the disclosure of the viewer's own presence within a maze of inferences. The work will be installed four times by October 2011, and in each venue it will be installed somewhat differently to account for the particular spaces and contexts.²

If you visited this work at the Belkin Art Gallery, you might first have encountered Peter Aguer Yuot, who was sitting at the reception desk. Aguer Yuot is a Sudanese refugee activist, one of the "lost boys" orphaned by the Sudanese Civil War. Aguer Yuot was a performer in the video component of *World Rehearsal Court*, where he stood in the background as a security guard and spoke no lines. In the

Gallery, he spoke and interacted. He greeted people as they came to the Gallery (twenty-five to fifty each day), and, gauging their interest, drew them into his story. The World Court has a warrant out for the arrest of Sudan's president Omar al-Bashir. Aguer Yuot's presence in the Gallery and the availability of his story brought the business of the World Court to viewers through a one-on-one encounter with a person displaced by war. It also initiated, for Belkin Art Gallery viewers, the mirroring, reflecting and doubling by which *World Rehearsal Court* progresses: after encountering Aguer Yuot acting as the receptionist, viewers might see him on the screen acting as a court guard. Strictly speaking, Aguer Yuot's presence is not part of the piece. But the decision to hire him was at the urging of the artist. Besides doing good education animation, Aguer Yuot's participation foregrounded the play between representation and reality that unfolded in the exhibition proper.

The first gallery is a darkened, carpeted room separated from the foyer by a Plexiglas wall. The Plexiglas wall refers at once to the modern high-tech courtroom, such as the court in The Hague or the special court built in Vancouver for the Air

India bombing trial, and to the reflecting surfaces of Dan Graham's installations and pavilions. These references coincide around the critiques of Graham and others of the ubiquitous reflecting, transparent and opaque surfaces of the modern city, which displace "real" space while capturing and reflecting our images.

Gallery visitors will see an array of video monitors through their own reflections in the Plexiglas wall as they enter the first viewing space. There, they can sit on benches as if they were in the spectators' section at a trial. The dark room is muffled by grey carpet and grey painted walls. There isn't much sound, and viewers must put on headphones to hear the proceedings. Six flat-screen monitors seem to float, suspended from the ceiling, on the other side of the transparent wall: six in a row, showing the accused, the defense, the judge, the witness seen from behind and facing the judge, the court clerk and the prosecution. A seventh monitor is placed below and shows the witness from the front. The cameras are static. But at infrequent intervals, say, after an adjournment or before a session and sometimes in the middle of testimony, the cameras circle in unison and reveal

the room—a high school gymnasium, it turns out—where we can see behind the scenes. The cameras move in unison because they are all fixed to a centre-pivoting frame on wheels. There is a picture of this apparatus in a smaller adjacent gallery that also contains a vitrine holding newspaper clippings about the Air India bombing trial courtroom.

The script is assembled from the transcripts of two famous tribunals. The International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) is a group of trials including that of Slobodan Milošević. As readers might recall, Milošević defended himself while refusing to recognize the legality of the court's jurisdiction; his histrionics were fodder for many international newscasts. His trial began in 2002 and ended abruptly, without a verdict, when Milošević died suddenly in 2005. Former Liberian president Charles Taylor's trial, the Special Court for Sierra Leone, began in 2008 and is still going as of December 2010.³ In her script, Radul changed all the proper names, but otherwise sections of the transcripts are acted out verbatim (about four hours of material). Other changes, such as having the character of the "accused former president of the

Twenty-first Republic” played by a man of Asian rather than European background, further sever the transcripts from their topicality and transform them into generalized, even mythic narrative. This helps us encounter these familiar stories of atrocities as if they were not so familiar.

The segments are titled and give us the session number and date. Of course, they are engrossing and disturbing. But viewers will also be struck at how specialized the language of the court is, how unconvivial it is, how often the judge has to enforce the use of specialized language and to silence language unruly to the court. There is a language for teasing out the truth, if by truth we mean what is consistent. There are also protocols around taped evidence, which is, as it were, already true. Radul’s choices highlight something of the structure of what is going on around conventions of language, taped evidence and how the presence of recording devices is spoken of. While the underlying concern is with the events that are being described the historical forces that produced them are not a concern of the court. Through the court’s emphasis on procedure, the parsing of witness accuracy, consistency, we begin to get the feeling that

there is a distance between the textual record the court is trying to produce, by rephrasing and questioning and the flow of minutiae that unfolds before us as a video record of a proceeding; and that in this distance, something is breaking down.

The second, larger gallery is given over mainly to a live-feed interactive installation. The gallery is divided lengthwise by a partition wall. In the corner farthest from the entrance, a wall has been built to create a small “evidence” room. Viewers might first notice—as it is often in motion—a camera, immediately to their left, mounted on a tripod attached to a moving dolly that traverses the gallery on fixed tracks. The camera track is the dialectical counterpoint to the camera apparatus for the taping of the World Court reenactments. The gallery camera moves as an automaton; the taping apparatus pivots using human labour. But more to the point, the apparatus records and the tracking camera does not: one becomes an actor in an enactment that is a fixed, repeating, closed system; the other, also an actor in the space, moves and sends images in real-time live feed.

Plinths, some very oddly shaped, surmounted by objects punctu-

ate the space. On either side of the partition wall there are two banks of four video monitors each. Since the screens face away from the entrance, viewers will not immediately know what is on those screens and might linger, looking at objects on plinths. These include an old newspaper account of a libel trial from 1883 that hinged on the question of whether or not an artist's portrait busts were in fact genuinely his own work, and a copy of Donald Allen's *New American Poetry* encased in a Plexiglas sheath and open to a passage of poetics by Jack Spicer.⁴ Other objects include things one might find in a game of Clue. There are also portrait busts that look like the kind forensic artists make on discovered victims' skulls with Plasticine. There are photographs from the opening sequence of *Rashomon*, of Brigitte Bardot on the set of *Le Mépris*, of a forest interior (from the University Endowment Lands), of a man from a Flickr image search. Viewers might notice three surveillance cameras attached to the wall because, like the camera on the trestle, these cameras are often in motion, pivoting on their axes like the eyes of a chameleon.

The banks of monitors are showing live feed from these four cameras. The cameras fre-

quently change their focus and zoom in on details in the gallery, such as the pictures on the wall. Indeed, the pictures are partly there as a map for the cameras, as something to focus on. The cameras fictionalize the space. For example, close up and onscreen, the forest photograph might seem to be a forest until the camera pans back to reveal that it is a picture of a forest on a wall. When the gallery has many people in it, or even a few who are dispersed throughout the space, they can get caught unaware in the survey of the cameras. Working with the intervals of motion and stillness that has the quality of dance or music, the cameras are "choreographed," to use Radul's term, and work with the intervals of motion and stillness to make a formally interesting pattern on the monitors. Sometimes, for example, the image from one camera will repeat over several screens. Viewers can see the room, or most of it, while they watch the screens. The immediate striking effect is to see how transformed the space becomes through the camera's lens. All the angles, boundaries and vectors we assume and take for granted are disrupted. Through the cameras, the verticals and horizontals of the gallery are all diagonals. It is kind of like a cubist paint-

ing or Kurt Schwitters' *Merzbau*. The view from the camera on the track cinematizes the space, turning it into a tracking shot. This is most dramatic when the camera crosses the partition and goes from one exaggerated perspective to another. Viewers can simultaneously see the actual space and its inhabitants, animate or otherwise, and the cameras' representations of the space; this is the main effect of the installation. The live-feed images, with their dramatic perspectival regress and skewed angles, are unsettling because they pit the truth of the camera's neutral mechanical eye against the evidence of our own eyes. We feel ourselves to be situated in one space and see ourselves in another, while knowing that they are simultaneous and the same. These rapidly changing views of the room, which sometimes include ourselves, are drawn from the camera language of cinema and recall the idea of the camera as an automaton with its own powers of penetration. We recognize this cinematic choreography as that expressive, potentially revolutionary use of the medium valorized as incendiary by Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein. *World Rehearsal Court* also makes reference to Jean-Luc Godard and Akira Kurosawa. The latter's *Rashomon*, in par-

ticular, is a narrative about conflicting, differing views of the same event. Godard's *Contempt* includes a famous scene where the two principal characters argue and dissect their relationship while the camera tracks between them, spatializing their relationship rather than facializing it in close-ups.

The contrast between the "neutral" fixed view of the cameras in the World Court re-enactments and the highly "expressive," even probing, views of the cameras in the gallery installation could not be more pronounced. The language of the camera that records the transcript re-enactment is static, as if the stationary point of view, crystallizing objectivity and disinterest, was somehow neutral. When the cameras move it is in unison, since they are integrated into a larger fixed structure. When they move it is to reveal the artifice, the backstage. In the live-feed installation, the cameras turn the space into a cinematic field. Not just the motion of the cameras themselves, which gives them the character of probing automatons, but references in the room remind us of the fictional disembodied eye of fictional cinema, except it is applied to a simultaneously real space in which we can see ourselves. Are these two scopic

regimes in opposition: the first attached to the law, the second to cinema; one to truth, the other to fiction? Or is it the dialectical inverse? As we full well know the tapes of the World Court re-enactment are recordings of actors acting and that the images we see in the live-feed installation are of real people such as ourselves existing in the unfolding moment. So the Court's search for truth is represented by fiction through "objective" media. We are alienated from our real-time experience by being transformed into the conventions of cinematic representation, in counterpoint to our own bodies' experience of being in the space. It seems the body is the issue here, to return to the bug-a-boo of theatricality. The installation makes the viewers register their own somatic experience in a different key than a representation of the body.

A room has been built in the corner of the main gallery where the cameras cannot penetrate. The artist calls this the Evidence Room. It contains some pieces of the set and costumes used in the World Court videos. A shelf holds more portrait busts: Plasticine heads of the type forensic artists use to reconstruct faces from skulls. Charts and photocopied image notes are tacked to the walls.

A mirror box sits on a trolley in the middle of the room. The mirror box is a two-chambered wooden box divided by a mirror and designed for the alleviation of pain due to perceived cramping in phantom limbs. This box seems to be a microcosmic variation on the doubling, correspondences and mirroring going on throughout the installation: it is a model of the gallery split in two. The therapeutic trick of the box is that it can fool the phantom limb into thinking it moves through the mirrored movement of the real limb.

In the foyer of the building, an installation divides the space with another Plexiglas panel that is set up as a *trompe l'oeil* mirror. Ordinarily the main gallery has an entrance of its own off the high corridor that bisects the Gallery building. But Radul has blocked this corridor with a Plexiglas divider. Almost-identical chairs are placed, mirroring each other, on either side of the divider to view flat-screen monitors that pick up the feed from one of the surveillance cameras. Two identical coffee cups, casually situated on the floor on either side of the Plexiglas, add to the mirror illusion. There are two photos on the Plexi: St. John the Baptist faces one way, Brigitte Bardot the other. This installation, like

the evidence room, is beyond the purview of the cameras. Sitting in one of the chairs, one can see without being seen.

Radul's long engagement with performance art has centred on testing conventions of self-presentation. Her more recent experiments with installations involving live-feed videos, such as *Proposal for Ghost Pass Rehearsal Park* (2006), continued that exploration in order to set up a situation of interactivity. (It too mixed live-feed monitors with an assortment of objects, photographs and texts that had the character of props or "evidence" but were presented as sculpture.) This interactivity, involving the body, becomes an encounter with a folding and unfolding mirror-imaging of the real and the represented, in which we rehearse ourselves. Radul pits this activity of possible transformation against the linguistic rigidities of the court. Which installation is the real limb and which the phantom?

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www.worldrehearsalcourt.com

Endnotes

1. Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
2. Following its installation at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery (9 October–6 December 2009), *World Rehearsal Court* was shown at the Generali Foundation, Vienna, Austria (2 June–15 August 2010); Media City Seoul, Korea (7 September–17 November 2010); and the Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, Oslo, Norway (June–October 2011).
3. The trial can be followed online at www.charlestaylortrial.org.
4. Donald M. Allen, *The New American Poetry* (New York and London: Grove Press and Evergreen Books, 1960).

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wilderness, territory and the origins of the Modern Canadian landscape" and "Disfigured Nature" in *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity and Contemporary Art* (2007); "Transmission difficulties: Vancouver painting in the 1960s" in *Paint* (2006); and "The Lost City: Vancouver Painting in the 1950s" in *A Modern Life: Art and Design in British Columbia 1945-1960* (2004). Recent curated exhibitions include *Mark Boulos* (2010); *Judy Radul: World Rehearsal Court* (2009); *Exponential Future* (2008); *Intertidal: Vancouver Art & Artists* (2005/06) at the Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst (MuHKA) in Antwerp, Belgium; *Rebecca Belmore: Fountain* (2005) for the Venice Biennale Canadian Pavilion; and *Thrown: Influences and Intentions of West Coast Ceramics* (2004), from which emerged his current publication project on British Columbia's studio pottery movement. He is presently researching Concrete Poetry for an upcoming publication and exhibition.