

JUAN A. GAITÁN
ONLY PEOPLE AND THINGS

JUDY RADUL
7 SEPTEMBER – 6 OCTOBER 2007

At first glance, Judy Radul's works may seem erratic, governed by free associations. Upon closer examination, however, they begin to reveal a program, a careful construction that is nonetheless never entirely revealed. It is important that the precision with which the works are constructed doesn't overpower the random ways in which we make associations because it is in the moments of relaxation that they allow us, as viewers, to come up with our own set of relations. *Concrete Examples*, one of the three works exhibited at Catriona Jeffries Gallery, lists the objects that Maurice Merleau-Ponty used to illustrate his examples in his essay "The Thing and the Natural World." While Merleau-Ponty presents his choice of objects as apparently random — or merely convenient, as they are the objects that surround him at the time of writing — Radul's "abstraction" (of objects from the examples) gives us the sense that underlying this essay from 1945 is a perhaps unconscious self-portrait of its author. As Radul has pointed out in conversations, the things that surround Merleau-Ponty in his writing, or at least those things he chooses to bring up reveal a certain anachronism; choice — as in what Merleau-Ponty chooses as a suitable object for each example — is the moment in which these anachronisms or temporal displacements intersect with subjectivity. The relationships that people have with things hold a strong grasp on Judy Radul's attention and imagination. It is for this reason that in Radul's practice *Concrete Examples* (also known as *Concrete Objects*) is both central (for its theme) and atypical (for its discreetness or autonomy). Most of her other works, in performance as well as in video, include the audience and the viewing experience as part of an experimentation. This is where her work distances itself from the more conventional forms of experimental film- and video-making.

For the present exhibition at Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Judy Radul is presenting two new works, *Describe Video* (2006),

and *Five Pieces of Relation* (2005). In these works we can identify technology, subjectivity, and text as three elements, or themes, that have been present in her practice, which now spans two decades. Both *Describe Video* (2007) and *Five Pieces of Relation* (2006) ask the viewer to make her or his own connections, relations, perhaps even draw personal conclusions, though her work actively withholds its own. In these works, a speaker's remarks, commands, observations, value judgements, or opinions are confronted with the responses of the interlocutor, who is perhaps the key subject in Radul's work, and whose reaction is always suggesting either a failure of communication or a conflict between the command and the will. Of course, the characters in her works often exchange roles as speakers and interlocutors, as we do in real life. This substitution of roles, present also in other works like *Downes Point* or *Room 302* (the latter made collaboratively with Geoffrey Farmer) or *And So Departed (Again)*, anticipates a situation in which the viewer is thrown; asked to work out her or his role, part or function.

Describe Video would fit in the category of the short film, and is the first piece by Radul to require conventional cinematic viewing conditions. In the past, Radul had avoided the straight projection and the dark room because, in conjunction, they tend to isolate the work and the viewer as two distinct phenomena in the museological set-up. As a solution to this "problem" — in scare-quotes because not everyone sees it as a problem — in *Describe Video* Radul has constructed a series of links between the characters, the actors, and the viewer. In this short film, the subjects, actors, or characters have been thrown into a situation that can only happen through technology: the actors (Andrew and David) are actually blind, but the characters they play (Adler and Davis) are sighted. The narrative, however, unfolds in spite of this fact. The video shows two men, architects perhaps, having a conversation often interpellated by strange digressions. A mutual project seems to be the cause of the

characters' conversation, and also the reason for these two men sharing the space they are in. In the space, which we assume is an office, we see a table with papers spread on top of it, a bottle of water and a glass resting on the nearest end; the two actors take turns standing up and pacing, placing and replacing things around the office, or looking out a window that can be seen on the far left. Behind them is a bookshelf with books and scale models and random objects. A drafting table has been placed on the far right. The characters show a total visual engagement with each other and the things surrounding them. The office is in disarray, which leads Adler to conclude that it has been broken into; while it turns out that only an umbrella was stolen (a factor that gains significance in relation to Adler's diatribe against the excessive amount of rain in the city), it is a missing master key that causes him anxiety. At some point, Adler looks out the window and sees his umbrella in someone else's hand. The key is also found, its finding constituting the 'climactic' moment of the piece. This event of break-in sets free Adler's tough but equanimous litany against the city, which in his view only makes itself "felt" through violent acts. In the short time that it takes for this plot to unfold, Adler and Davis go through a wide range of topics, from a report on a whippet in the newspaper, to Goretex, the London Dome, and their ideas about how sheltering people from the rain would change people's attitude and life. The title of the piece makes reference to a *video description* track in which the visual component is described. This relatively unfamiliar feature, meant for blind audiences so as to help them better follow the narrative, provides a layer to the piece that is totally unexpected, as the voice that does the description is consistently directing our gaze towards what "it" considers we should be looking at. What we see (us, sighted viewers and thus not the intended audience for the video description) is unavoidably in conflict with what "it" sees *for us*, and in this divergence a certain resistance must emerge on our part. It is in our capacity to resist the descrip-

tion of which we are an unintended audience that we are, in turn, the intended viewers of Radul's piece.

Although it is not represented in this exhibition, it is worthwhile to cast a brief glance at *Downes Point* (2005), for in that work Radul has also established a situation in which the viewer is thrown into a space of experimentation. In this former work, the central character (playing a casting director) engages a cast which patiently waits in line; he asks them to do two or three things and in rather obscure terms he signals them, one by one, to walk out in one of two directions, left (when he signals with his left arm) and right (when he signals with his right); his hand-signals come together with voice-signals: "smoke...." In the gallery, the visitor would walk into a space flanked by five synchronized projections (corresponding to the five cameras that were employed) placed high above our head: on one wall, two joint projections produce or add up to the space that the "director" inhabits (all by himself), the other three are arranged similarly on the opposite wall, the centre one showing the group of cast members waiting in line — facing the director — the other two producing adjacent spaces (left and right) to which the cast will go according to the director's instruction. In the gallery, the sequence of events unfolds *over our heads*, as we (as viewers) are "ignored" by the piece (and actively so): the space between the director and his actors is no place for us to be, and yet we are there, between two composite projections, inside a gap produced by technological artifice, but unable to project ourselves into the situation set up in the image: we are not exchanging roles with the director, we can't empathize with the actors either. In compelling us to remain within our role as viewers, *Downes Point* forces a continuum between the space it produces for the subjects in the image and the space it accentuates for the viewers in the gallery. We, as viewers, are only made to be part of the phenomenon in our role as absent, disembodied, or negated subjects.

On a few occasions Radul has noted that the performance is the meeting point between the character and the actor. Typically, in stage performance and in cinema, the ideal performance of a role tends to be a seamless marriage between two subjectivities, that of the actor, and that of the character. For instance, it has often been said of Sarah Bernhardt that the audience never saw the end of her performances, for she would masterfully draw herself from the stage, into the crowd, the streets, and everyday life without the slightest hint of ever being out of character. This is why it was also said that her stage was Paris *tout entier* — and not only Paris, but also London, Chicago, New York. It is known that this grand act required much rehearsal, all of which was carried out in private. Radul's focus on the imprecise or embryonic aspects of the performative have brought this private creature to the light in order to provoke or reveal the spasmodic rather than the seamless moments of subjectivity. Radul's performances have focused on the rehearsal, the entry and the exit, and the applause, because these moments denote a space where two alien subjectivities — the actor's vs. the character's — have to work it out, or are most confused; it is in the rehearsal, and in the rehearsal alone, where the subject is allowed its contradictions; and it is in the applause where the actor reveals herself from beneath the costume. Rehearsal, improvisation, and the faltering and ambivalence that they involve, produce the moments in which the tensions between those two subjectivities arise and become visible. Neither in her performance works nor in her video works has Radul wanted to represent a character, or to dramatize, for example, her own or someone else's social and cultural experience. This would be too simplistic, even naïve for someone whose understanding of performance and video is informed by writings such as Kaja Silverman's. In that encounter between the actor and his or her prescribed role, in that struggle to incorporate two alien subjectivities, a number of possibilities rise to the surface like a partitioning bubble.

Radul calls *Five Pieces of Relation* a video-sculpture. This is important because it sets us up for a confrontation between the convivial optimism of relational aesthetics and the severe autocracy of minimalist sculpture. The piece is composed of an LCD screen, four CRT monitors, and a teleprompter that Radul has customized with a 20-inch Apple flat screen. The LCD screen and the CRT monitors form an assemblage, held together by a wood structure that has the look of a control booth, or an editing suite. This look of interactive functionalism is reinforced by the teleprompter, a memory-replacement device usually meant to run a text that an on-stage or on-camera speaker will read aloud. The text that runs through the teleprompter is at once “informative” (though in a throwaway daily news way) and “prodding,” as the daily pulp about animals is punctuated by philosophical remarks, or speculations, on the animal-human polarity. This text assemblage then carries over to at least one of the scenes depicted in the CRT monitors: a “view” on the Co-Op Radio show *Animal Voices*, in which, as the title suggests, the animals are not only excessively anthropomorphised, but also subjected to extreme empathy from the host and his guests. The connection between the two pieces is “literalized” by the existence of a cable that runs from the wood-structure to the teleprompter. It is also made by the fact that a “hidden camera” registers the viewers that approach the teleprompter on the LCD screen that forms part of the multi-screen assemblage. In the assemblage, a speaker emits the sound of two men that are making electronic music. They are featured in the central CRT monitors. The other two show the scene from *Animal Voices* and a view of a public plaza. Igor Santizo appears in all three scenes. In the middle panels he is one of the two musicians, in *Animal Voices* he is responding with physical gestures to what the radio host and guests say and do (we can hear them through a set of headphones) and in the public plaza he sits on a bench and (as we hear from another set of headphones) responds to the instructions

that an off-camera voice gives. The instructions are meant to have him do the same movements he performed in *Animal Voices*, but he ignores some of them. The entire piece could be seen as an environment. The viewer's relationship to this environment could be called "relational," but not in the "user-friendliness" and "interactivity" proposed by Nicolas Bourriaud, but rather an abject empathy with the environment — a hiccup, to pay homage to Chaplin's famous scene in *The Immigrant* in which Charlie "catches" someone else's hiccups as they both enter into a rhythmic, two-stroke convulsion, almost mimetic of the pistons of an engine, that appears inescapable insofar as they become the cause of each other's fits.

In *Five Pieces of Relation*, as in several other works that Radul has produced in the past few years, technologies are made to do things they are not meant to do from a utilitarian sense. In describing this work to me, Radul used the word "circuit." She used it because formally — visually — the piece does resemble a circuit, with its multiple parts scattered but systematically interconnected. But she also rejected the term for being insufficiently descriptive of the work's own insufficiencies, which are, as I've said, central to the work because it is in its deficiencies and shortcomings that the audience is allowed in. These insufficiencies, however, are not technical or technological; they are aesthetic, visual, and aural. They occur in *Five Pieces of Relation* and in *Describe Video*, and also in *Downes Point* and perhaps most manifestly in *Room 302*. In *Downes Point*, for instance, it is the hand-signal (the director's hand) and not the voice-signal, which instructs the specific direction in which the actor is meant to go; the voice-signal opens up a universe of possibility for meaning and direction, while the hand-signal narrows it down to specific meaning (to go away) and direction (left or right). For the installation of *Room 302* the props used to recreate a courtroom were transported to the gallery and piled up, like rubble; the screen onto which the

video was projected was found leaning against the pile. The video showed an unhinged dramatization of a trial in which actors and things exchange roles and functions, and objects or things are used and fail to mimetically represent the "sound" and "look" of a crime scene and even of the criminal act itself. This exchange of roles in *Room 302* brings us back to the problem of the interlocutor, which I've said is perhaps the most important subjective position in Radul's work. As the actors in the drama of a trial begin to exchange roles, the actual subject of the piece shifts from being about a trial to being about the roles themselves, and about which actor may be most appropriate for each corresponding role. But more things change in Radul's works, and in more subtle ways. In *Five Pieces of Relation* we quickly recognize that in spite of the director's (Radul) instructions to respond as a "soundtrack" — albeit silently — to the events unfolding in the foreground, the presence of Igor (the infiltrator) as the constant in all the scenes is actually turning what's on the foreground of each into the backdrop for his role, which has now become central. Conversely, in *And So Departed (Again)*, where five directors direct a death scene acted by the same actress, the director's role is threatening to push the actress' to the background. It is not in its denotative state in the image, but in this confusion of the hierarchy that operates in the cinematic image, that technology's artifice is revealed, that is, the art of self-concealment, for technology is anxious to become imperceptible in every situation that it mediates. Conversely, subjects are usually attempting to assert themselves (ourselves), and in doing so we tend to produce seamless characters for ourselves; Sarah Bernhardt's and not Charlie Chaplin's. "There are only people and things," said Lefebvre. In Radul's work there are conceptual and conceptualized things, but never conceptualized people instead of things, which is what we find, for example, in Hollywood cinema, in which each character must fit a role that has already been assigned according to genre.