

Performance-Art Documents Capture the Ephemeral

Judy Radul's challenging new exhibition plays upon the hazy distinctions between truth and fiction, action and text

VISUAL ARTS

Judy Radul

Documents for Performance
At the Or Gallery until June 27

• BY ROBIN LAURENCE

The line between fact and fiction is not so much blurred in Judy Radul's exhibition at the Or Gallery as it is snagged, frayed, and knotted—and then somehow pulled tight again between two poles and dexterously walked upon. Ditto the relationship between performance art and its audience. And between performance art and the photo-textual record of its fleeting occurrence.

Titled Documents for Performance, the show consists largely of a series of grainy black-and-white photographs with accompanying labels, recording and describing a dozen "actions" that Radul undertook—not for a live audience but for the purpose of constructing the documents, the printed words and still images, of which this show is largely composed. However, at least one of these actions, *Clapping Performance*, did have a live audience (perhaps they all did if you count the photographers and others involved in their production) participating in its original manifestation. There's a sense here of a dimension within a skewed dimension, of a play within a time-warp play, of the amorphous past folded into the concrete present.

Radul is an interdisciplinary artist and writer best-known for her edgy performances, many of them given at the Western Front. These performances have examined sexuality, gender, and the social construction of the female subject through the language of Radul's body and through vocalizations of her inventive texts. Try to find an artist's clipping file on Radul, however, in the place where artists' clipping files usually reside. It ain't there. Doesn't exist. What does exist, however, is the catalogue to Radul's 1993 exhibition at the Front, *To Shine*, with essays by Scott Watson and Susan Lord. Watson's essay, particularly, struck me forcibly.

Watson looks at the reasons performance art is



Judy Radul's current exhibition at the Or Gallery documents such "partially actual" performances as being driven to the Silver City parking lot in the trunk of an old Chevy Malibu.

not taken seriously in this country, then shoots down the usual explanations about its ephemerality and unexhibitability. There exists, he writes, a "deeper resistance to the form", arising from the performance artist's use of body and voice in intimate, uncontrollable, and disturbing ways. "It isn't just that people are indifferent," Watson asserts, "they actively don't want to know."

The truth of his argument plays right into the feelings of guilt I was already cultivating about my own failure to appreciate and critique performance art. My excuse has always been that I don't feel qualified to write about it, that the interdisciplinary nature of performance calls for a better understanding of theatre, dance, and music than I, trained in art history, could possibly bring to it, and blah blah blah. I've been feeding myself a line. Watson is right. Perform-

ance art is scarily intimate and messily visceral—and I've shied away from it. Which means that I'm as complicit as all my fellow critics in the nonexistence of Judy Radul's clipping file. (Still, Watson writes, "Something essential is lost when the unruliness of performance is subjected to a critique....The writer's analytical voice participates in the very system of authority that the performance undermines.") It's no accident that the first body of Radul's work I've chosen to review is composed of photographs, texts, and audio- and videotapes. These mediums provide enough intellectual distance from the physical act to ease my immediate discomfort.

Which is not to say it's a comfortable show. It's provocative on many different planes. Radul's actual or partially actual or semi-fictional performances documented here range from improvising

a "dance" in an underground parkade to being driven in the trunk of a car to a multiplex movie theatre in Richmond (a diversion from the intended site, ironically or possibly fictitiously described on the label—who can know?); and from dressing up in a bunny suit on Easter Sunday and walking across the city carrying a boom box broadcasting wild-animal sounds (or so we're told) to strapping a fake boob onto her pantyhosed leg in pseudocelibration of Mother's Day. Radul is not the only performer in her works: friends, colleagues, and lover are photographed carrying pieces of foam core through downtown Vancouver or "improvising interactions" with hotel-room objects or standing moodily beside a vintage Malibu.

There's a great deal of wry and knowing humour in these works, but there's also a considerable seriousness in their investigation of the symbiosis between the ephemeral performance and the photographs and text that fix it in time. In the past, Radul has written about the significance of the audience's participation in performance art, their activating and possessing it. Here, however, she examines the gap that exists not only between the performance and its documentation, but also between modes of documentation, i.e., between the photograph and the text. It's the text that tells us—truthfully or not—how to read the photo. It's the text that conveys—adequately or not—the conceptual agenda of the performance into the forgetful future.

Although the focus here is just those gaps of photo-textual documentation, Radul has also produced site-specific audio and video works for the show. The audiotape, broadcast at the front door of the gallery and weaving itself into the noise of the street (voices into voices, the roar of the ocean into the roar of the traffic), plays with notions of naming and calling. The videotape, made with fellow performance artist Warren Arcan in the basement below the Or, appends a sense of the ridiculous to a history of theatre, within a dark and musty space filled with boxes, props, and costumes.

It's a super show—and I promise that the next time Radul gives one of her frighteningly live performances, I'll be there. ■