In Conversation: an interview with Allison Yearwood, Executive Director, and artist Judy Radul

AY: Judy, let's start by introducing yourself and your practice to our audience. This is your first time showing in Winnipeg, and your career spans decades, delving into performance, technology, societal conventions, film/video, installation, etc., and addressing the complexities of identity, class, and political movements.

JR: Thanks Allison, I used to do a lot of performance and performance poetry, and I started to find people's liking of my work a bit unfulfilling. You like it or you don't, but that is just a first impression, like an instinctive judgement. Judgements that are less secure might provide more thought— like, what is going on here? The work should have a strong enough aesthetic experience that it might stick with you for a while and then the viewer/visitor can have it in their memory. I also like it if people think, ah…it could have been a bit different, this could have been over there, that could have been upside down, etc. Finding a way to imagine the work differently is a way that the viewer also puts themselves in the position of maker. To get that happening the art might have to find an edge where it would function for some but for other people, it just might not be their day to engage with it. Also, I don't even know what I am doing, it is a kind of experiment to see how technology can be used a bit differently, how to blend real and virtual space, live and recorded performance etc., I think it turned out quite okay and I hope some people find something in it. I hope some people take a selfie in front of the blurred backgrounds, in one way, that is what they are for.

AY: *Live Lecture Streaming Podium: I am Not a Cat* was initially conceptualized and explored within the global pandemic by investigating our increased consumption of lectures, talks, meetings, and casual chats within this live streaming platform. Social media photo-based apps are being normalized to such an extent that researchers are learning our neural pathways are correcting in favour of the artificial. With the current history still considering how we will archive this global shared event, what elements of the work feel like it may evolve or what may also be archived with this moment?

JR: I actually conceived of the work in a vague way before the pandemic, but for sure the pandemic brought it into focus. For instance instead of bringing in artists for talks we had an online

series (at SFU School for the Contemporary Arts where I teach) and so we could actually have more international people. Jeremy Deller did a lovely, generous talk; he seemed to be sitting in his laundry room, in London, and the sun was setting, meanwhile, in Vancouver, it was morning time, this blend of "real-time," "meanwhile-time", and recorded time, was the impulse to have a "real" sunset projected behind the speakers on the podium.

But you asked a great question, and I haven't answer it yet because I have not thought much about what "may evolve or what may also be archived with this moment" of the pandemic etc. To be specific, I think that "face filters" (or lenses as they are called on Snapchat) and "backgrounds" must be transitory elements because if our communication and digital work technologies (Apple Vision Pro, the Metaverse etc.) are moving to greater immersion (for better or worse) then this planar world of masks and backgrounds won't be needed. I suppose we will have full avatars, and we won't have "backgrounds" as we will be in immersive augmented reality environments. However, who knows, people still like old technologies, like LP vinyl, VHS video, and live theatre itself. That is why with the "blurred background" screens I wanted to reference real spaces including a theatre, a small presentation stage, and an airplane.

AY: It seems that "Live Lecture Streaming Podium: I am Not a Cat" questions the perceived banality of delivering a lecture while also challenging the roles of voyeur and the surveilled. The work appears to carefully mimic human behavior and raises questions about the machine learning aspect within it. It's impressive how the work manages to handle dense and complex concepts without collapsing or diminishing them.

JR: You mention a lot of potential references and registers the work could be read with and I appreciate that. In regard to your question about "density", I think we think in/as complex webs and densities and intensities and some open space etc. in my artwork I am just comfortable with all that and see it as potential. However, of course as a human who walks around with my own densities I don't always want to encounter another total tangle of ideas in an artwork, so I do try to offer a level that is just an interesting or even humorous experience, and I hope people can just enjoy that as well.

AY: I think the tension between viewing lectures as performances and as sources of authentic academic information is quite interesting. On one hand, the performative aspect adds an engaging and dynamic element to the delivery of information, making it more accessible and

memorable for the audience. On the other hand, it's essential to ensure that the academic content remains accurate and valuable despite the performative nature of the presentation. Striking a balance between these two aspects involves careful consideration of presentation style, content delivery, and audience engagement techniques. It's about creating an experience that is both informative and captivating. How do you think this tension could be effectively navigated?

JR: Good question. I am not sure I have put too much thought into that tension. I suppose the staging of "real" lectures is a way to recognize the performativity in many situations, even those that don't appear directly engaged with capital "P" performance. I think the face filters, which are a kind of digital mask, add a performative element. We can think about performance not only as produced by an intended action, or way of being, but also by a cultural or technological frame. My original impetus is to think about the way media "frames" our actions and I should have something to say about this interface between the live and the mediated…whatever I would say (it seems I don't have anything up my sleeve at the moment) I would try not to create an artificial dichotomy between live performance and the "mediated", they both seem to involve chains of operations which would intermingle, desire, cultural expectations, physical space, technological frames and amplification, streaming, and various modes of reception. In my own talk in the "apparatus" I have a short section on "oratory", mentioning that in 2008 "oratory" did not seem prevalent. Still, perhaps just on the brink, and now it has returned (at least within the cultural sphere I am looking at…it might have been prevalent in other spheres in an ongoing way) through Ted Talks and online formats such as podcasts etc.

AY: While refining our discussion on your work and process, you shared such a great macro/micro infinity viewpoint on screens and glass, can you please share it here?

JR: I wonder what I said… I have made works that deal with the materiality of windows, and glass, and mirrors and screens and I try to think about the relation and differences between these manifestations of reflection and transparency. I guess one thing we notice is that physical restraints are becoming more immaterial (in some cases) so that you go through an airport or other official space and you might encounter many barriers made of transparent glass or plexi.

As digital "gates" and border-keeping methods (biometrics such as eye scans, face recognition and digital fingerprinting) are instantiated the barriers persist but they are perhaps
harder to locate. Glass as a divider-connector is a fascinating material, the screen as a window (Paul Virilio called TV the "third window"), turned into something not like a window…probably we still don't know what all those augmented surfaces are, but they are apparently soon to be supplanted by immaterial augmented reality space produced by wearable glasses etc. I am already nostalgic for the connection-division that glass produces (which Dan Graham and others wrote about). The glass of a window creates a relation to what is beyond the glass, that perhaps sets us up for the screen experience, yet the "beyond" of the screen is a non-contiguous not here, not now, perhaps nowhere space. Tangled into this are questions about how we reconcile the use of glass as a control surface with the metaphors of democracy as "transparent." I think perhaps it shows that transparency was either not a good metaphor, or too simple. One could go on, so much to say about glass.

AY: The work could be mistaken for simply an dynamic, quirky, whimsical response to our overdependence on screens and technology, but as you sit with it, it becomes unnervingly uniquely human. Does this assessment resonate? Does this feel like a tool or a response to cultural techniques?

JR: It feels like an ensemble of techniques. There is humour in it I hope, bringing together the live, and the little riser and frame that is enough to be called a "stage" and therefore encourage performance and oratory…bringing that together with live and pre recorded video, and with the "real time" of the hour long sunset, going to darkness, marking time as a backdrop. Each of my elements corresponds to something we use in the broader culture, but I hope that I did not take any of the elements for granted and that they produce questions as well as functions, or that one of their functions is to produce questions about how they are "functioning."