



View of Richard Maxwell's theater piece *Ads*, 2010, showing video performance by Ramin Bahrani; at P.S. 122.

RICHARD MAXWELL

P.S. 122

The use of video in theater and dance performances has a storied history, from the early work of Robert Whitman, Trisha Brown, Deborah Hay, Carolee Schneemann and a host of others to the more technologically sophisticated later projects of Merce Cunningham, Robert Lepage and the British company Complicite. Some multiscreen video installations in galleries and museums have become, in effect, performances requiring audience navigation and interaction (e.g., Julian Rosefeldt's *Asylum*, 2001-02, or Michelle Handelman's *Dorian*, 2009). But rarely, if ever, has video been used as theater, with no actors present. Richard Maxwell's *Ads* (short for advertisements) did just that: it eliminated live performers, replacing them with videotaped performances projected in a theater. A reviewer for the *New York Times* remarked that the piece seemed like a video installation transferred to a theater. Happily, it was much more than that.

Maxwell has carved out a unique place for himself in experimental theater, where he is known for paring down language and gesture so rigorously that his actors hardly seem to be acting and his plays barely qualify as theater. Eschewing the descriptors "deadpan" and "stylized," he says his works are very real, and reflect how people actually speak and move. For *Ads*, he asked friends and friends of friends to write monologues that truly bespeak who they are or what they believe in—effectively, ads for their per-

sonhood, not selling points addressed to potential employers or partners. During this one-hour theater piece, he presented 10 or so monologues (the characters varied from night to night, drawn from a pool of 30), rear-projected onto an offstage glass plate. Using a common theater trick, the images were reflected onto another glass surface onstage, which made the performers seem ghostlike. Behind the glass was a wooden box—a soapbox?—which served as the only prop. As the videotaped players "entered" the room, they appeared to stand atop the box and speak.

And what affecting tales they told. A former cocaine addict talked about "believing"; a hospice doctor inveighed against the health system for ignoring end-of-life needs; an immensely appealing middle-aged woman from Brooklyn explained how she became a "bohemian"; a nattily dressed Upper East Sider bemoaned the ubiquity of cell phones and "teksing" (sic). The wonder is that these folks, while representative urban types, each emerged as unique and enthralling. With its exceptional sound and crisp, digitally filmed projections, *Ads* is fundamentally a work of theater. It cannot be casually encountered in a gallery space, nor will it be a sidebar entry to a film festival; Maxwell prefers the rawness of a scrappy black-box theater. The videos in *Ads* weren't edited; there are no artist's proofs. They were silenced when the run was over, but they might emerge again in a theater near you.

—Michael Rush