

the bride. The beaming grandfather at a baptism. He is one half of a lifetime love affair. Now, lying in his hospital bed or perched awkwardly in a gerichair, he is an absence guarded by pictures of the Blessed Mother.

From Vera I hear a litany of complaints; from the nurses, equal and opposite laments. Vera washes Alex, turns him, does physiotherapy, massages him, feeds him and gives him his medication. Nobody can do for Alex what Vera can do for Alex. Some nurses sympathize with her; others are like sparks to dynamite. Vera has become a patient: she is stressed, working half-time at the store and spending obsessively long hours caring for her husband. She assures me that I don't have to be her doctor; she already has one, whom she will see if necessary. There are case conferences with social workers, priests, chaplains, the palliative care team, the hospital risk management staff. Vera states that it is Alex who is suffering and that we should be occupied with *him*.

Inevitably, Alex suffers complications: aspiration pneumonia, urosepsis

and bladder stones. It becomes clear that the intensivists do not deem him to be a candidate for the ICU; they urge me to deal with the issue of code status. Vera is backed into a corner, but instead of coming to some acceptance of Alex's precarious existence, she redoubles her efforts to keep him alive. She takes leave from her job to watch over him night and day, sleeping fitfully across three chairs, waking frequently to suction or do chest physio. Some official attempts are made to send her home, but because no one wants to face the unpleasantness of security staff dragging a distraught woman to the bus stop at the hospital entrance, compromises are made.

I struggle with my role in the middle. I understand the futility of Alex's care and discuss this with Vera, the nurses and my medical colleagues. I understand the stress of the nurses having to deal with someone so seemingly unreasonable. But I am also moved by such unfailing love in the face of hopelessness. I can't deny that Vera knows Alex, and that if Vera says Alex is get-

ting sick (afebrile, O₂ sats of 95% and a clear chest exam), Alex gets sick. Vera trusts me and listens to me but she will only hear what she is able to hear.

Birthdays, Christmas, New Year's, anniversaries — the family gathers round to celebrate Alex's life. More pictures are added to the bulletin board. More prayers are said; a rosary hangs from the bed.

Everyone has an opinion: Vera is driven by unresolved guilt or grief or anger; she isn't facing reality and should be pitied; someone should get firm with her; Alex has no meaningful existence; he is unaware of the care and love lavished on him let alone able to respond to it; Alex is just a shell; he should be allowed to "go" with dignity.

Vera has her own opinion about Alex. "Thank God he has life," she tells me. His heart beats and he breathes. She will hold onto that life and dignify it. Vera knows Alex.

Chris Giles
Family physician
Hamilton, Ont.

Lifeworks

The aesthetics of immersion

Janet Cardiff

A Survey of Works, including Collaborations with George Bures Miller

May 25 to Sept. 8, 2002

Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal

Paradise Institute

June 28 to Sept. 2, 2002

National Gallery of Canada

This mid-career survey of work by Janet Cardiff and her collaborator/husband George Bures Miller was substantially put together by P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in New York with Carolyn Christov-Barargiev. It comes on the heels of the artists' stunning success as Canada's representatives at the Venice Biennale (the art-world's equivalent to the academy awards), where they received one of three special jury awards for *Paradise Institute*.

Immerse yourself in *Forty-Part Motet: a reworking of Spem in Alium by Thomas Tallis, 1575* (2001). Forty large speakers, propped up on stands (each is roughly mouth-



Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal

Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, 1999. *The Muriel Lake Incident*. Installation multimédia

height), are installed around the circumference of a large white cube. (Its original installation under the fan vaults of the reconstructed Rideau Street convent chapel at the National Gallery in Ottawa afforded far more drama.) Apparently unscripted sounds can be heard of the choir members preparing themselves for performance. They exercise their voices, make small talk and clear their throats. Mildly unnerving: some of these sounds may be coming from the other visitors in the room, but you

can't be sure. Then it starts: a soaring rendition of the choral motet. Breathtaking. You might want to sit down and close your eyes, in the well-accepted pose of long-haired music consumers, and completely lose yourself. Don't, or you'll miss a unique surveillance opportunity. Each singer was recorded individually with dedicated audio tracks piped to the separate speakers: one speaker — one voice. Move around and the individual singers start to emerge. This isn't remarkable in itself, except that because the voices are not voices, but mechanically reproduced traces, they can be scrutinized with a degree of intimacy not possible in the flesh. Get right up close and have a good listen. You won't embarrass anyone, and if you're lucky you'll catch some glitches.

To Touch (1993), one of the earliest works in the show, presents an old worn table surrounded by wall-mounted speakers in a darkened room. The distressed table top is equipped with sensors that trip audio recordings of conversations, breathing, music and clips of old movie soundtracks: a variation of the adage, "if walls could talk." Like much of Cardiff's work, the savvy use of new technology substantially accounts for its allure, and there is a pervasive but unspoken promise of an "interactive" experience. In the end, the extent of agency viewers have in *To Touch* consists of tripping one of nine prerecorded soundtracks.

Cardiff's furtive control extends throughout the museum and out into



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Janet Cardiff, 1997. *Playhouse*. Multimedia installation.

the city in a series of audio and video walks that have become her signature. Using the audio-guide (a staple of museum education departments for the past two decades) as her format, the artist leads viewers with her recorded voice through unofficial and private itineraries designed specifically for each site. As the tours proceed, ambient sounds, vague allusions to crimes and the voices of fictional characters are woven in. The audio quality is immaculate and employs a technique referred to as binaural recording. Two microphones mounted on a foam head approximate the geometry of human hearing and give a surprisingly spatial dimension to the sound. The effect is unsettling, and you can't be sure whether the children's voices heard in the distance or the jet flying overhead is real or not. Cardiff's own voice is deadpan and conspiratorial. She aims for passive neutrality: what she refers to as a "trance voice."

Cardiff calls the *Paradise Institute* "a mystery-spy movie," and that might significantly characterize much of the work profiled here. Both *Playhouse* (1997) and *The Muriel Lake Incident* (1999) are important precedents for the Venice entry, and are really variations of the same work. While B-thrillers provide the mood (and style), these pieces push the mystery outside the film screen into your head (via headphones), and provoke reflections on the cinematic apparatus itself. Each piece is a tour de force of model making and recreates, in miniature, the grand movie theatres of

the past with convincing details, precise sight lines and extreme foreshortening. As always, the artist's voice draws you in and redirects your attention away from the movie, which nevertheless provides a visual analogue to the vaguely menacing situation being portrayed outside the frame. Interesting but (perhaps more important) entertaining.

The avant-guard once saw its mission as subverting the hierarchies that defined authors and patrons, and nurturing a creative readership by de-

veloping new aesthetic strategies. Today artists are veering away from such lofty ideals, as if any notion of dynamic viewers participating in the cycle of artistic production and reception were better left to pinkos and anarchists.

Cardiff and Bures Miller's work is like a highbrow theme park. It's smart, fun and stylish. Forget the unfulfilled promises of "interactive," we don't use that word anymore. Try "immersive": no pretension to utopian aesthetics, but still very sexy.

Marcus Miller
Montreal, Que.

In perpetuity

The rain
acidic with pollution
weathers the faces
of our tombstones
erasing names
of those who paid
with fame or cash
for chiselled monuments of lime
ensuring immortality.

Soon the blurred and fading epitaphs
will be forgotten.

Try granite
next time.

Robert C. Dickson
Family physician
Hamilton, Ont.