

What if we heard everything? Nothing?

Alberta Biennial artists take on the information age

Published in FFWD November 15, 2007 by [Anthea Black](#) in [Visual Arts](#)

Tracing a theme through the Alberta Biennial of Contemporary Art is difficult with the works of 22 artists under one roof competing for attention. While it is tempting to slot every work within the dichotomy suggested by the exhibition's subtitle, *Living Utopia and Disaster*, most artists keep the spectrum of interpretation open to both sides, and other convincing ideas emerge. The monumental signature works by Jennifer Bowes, Paul Robert, Annie Martin and Kay Burns deal with the very ways that we communicate with one another. The accumulation of information pathways and forums for communication are of great interest to these artists — books, Internet databases, sound speakers, surveillance and technically assisted communication methods, such as Burns's *Converse*.

Her experience teaching a deaf student compelled Calgary artist Kay Burns to develop *Converse*, a new media work in which participants "talk" with each other through gestures, motion and expression. With shoes off, the trick is to stand on top of complex wired platforms that translate all this motion into vibration. It's a work that makes your body giggle and feet tingle with sensation pulsing upwards from the platform. There's no wandering aimlessly about the gallery here: *Converse* is a physically intense experience that gets the body moving and thinking about how exactly we communicate with others.

Interacting with works by Burns and Robert actually redefine how we use existing technologies to connect with each other. Robert's searchable Internet database and incredibly heavy catalogue of random letter combinations critique the obsessive western impulse to organize knowledge mathematically. Like an online dictionary, a quick search fails to turn up Wikipedia articles, image archives or endless smutty pop-up windows, but instead methodically cycles through the ABCs at one permutation per second. The work exists within the constant present of the Internet and also recalls conceptual artworks that chart the passage of time in seemingly more archaic forms — think On Kawara's series of paintings that depict only the date in stark sans-serif white on black canvas.

Together this grouping reads as a spectrum from the most coldly mediated to the downright seductive. Their textures, reverberations and aural landscapes manage to make a bodily impact, not to mention a sense of being flooded or overwhelmed by sensory information.

Jennifer Bowes's large knitted work uses the book as a beginning point, with page after page sliced into thin ribbons, run through a sewing machine to create "string" and then knitted into fabric of words that tower high into the gallery space. The work could have appeared in Truck Gallery's *ditdahditdit* group exhibition last winter as a companion to Angela Silver's wall works of shredded books, as the two book-based textiles have a lot in common. Bowes's even knitting surface is held up by strong steel rods (perhaps reading too literally as knitting needles) but the information

contained on the pages is so gnarled and incomprehensible, that the weight of the text and erasure of its written meanings smothers all sound and results in a heavy silence.

Annie Martin created her audio installation, titled *Nervous Space*, specifically for the Biennial, and the work follows in the tradition of debuting large new works by Alberta artists. With several speakers dotting a smoothly drywalled enclosure, each one compels a careful listen to the sounds emanating from this blank “canvas.” The work had a much more encompassing effect in its previous installation at the Art Gallery of Alberta where four walls closed out ambient sound and made for a more immersive environment. For the Walter Phillips Gallery in Banff, two walls would have to suffice. I discussed the *Nervous Space* with Annie Martin after marvelling at the range of sound within the work.

Fast Forward: *Nervous Space* is a highly constructed, technical piece, but when I listen to the sound component, I imagine the natural environment of Lethbridge — both your work and the landscape in which you live give a very windblown sensation. What kinds of individual sounds are we hearing from the speakers in your installation?

Annie Martin: There are many pictorial and naturalistic overtones to the sound, which is live, feeding from four different microphones placed in different locations around the gallery and foyer. The acoustics of the spaces and the narrow range of the little speakers transform the sound into something else.

I've been using microphones to bring live sound from outside the buildings (since living in Montreal), and playing it through arrays of speakers inside the gallery space.

It seems that “nervous” could refer to a central system of control, the feeling or sensation of nervousness. What are some associations that you are trying to create within the space?

Nervous in the title can refer to the nervous system and to some notion of anxiety or perhaps excessive sensitivity. What if we heard everything? It would be extraordinary and at the same time, unbearable. I'm interested in the filters we work with in the everyday to keep things workable, manageable. But if we start to shift the filters a little, magical things can happen.

Anthea Black