Vie des Arts

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Brenda Cleniuk: *Wind Song Machine*

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Cite this review

Garneau, D. (2009). Review of [Brenda Cleniuk: *Wind Song Machine*]. *Vie des Arts*, *53*(216), 10–10.

BRENDA CLENIUK

WIND SONG MACHINE

By David Garneau

Wind Song Machine
digital capture from Second Life, 2009
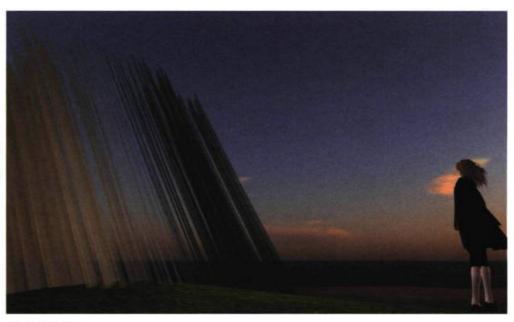Courtesy of Brenda Cleniuk

BRENDA CLENIUK IS A WELL-KNOWN ARTS ADMINISTRATOR. DIRECTOR OF NEUTRAL GROUND GALLERY AND DIRECTOR/CO-FOUNDER OF SOIL DIGITAL MEDIA SUITE. FOR MANY YEARS, SHE HAS BEEN THE PILOT LIGHT OF NEW MEDIA ART IN REGINA. WHAT IS LESS KNOWN, IS THAT CLENIUK IS ALSO AN ARTIST. A FREQUENT COLLABORATOR, SHE IS FINALLY MAKING A SOLO APPEARANCE WITH *WIND SONG MACHINE*, AN INTERACTIVE VIRTUAL MUSICAL SCULPTURE.

Her work is part of *How We Play*, an exhibition of works of art that only exist in Second Life, an interactive electronic world inhabited by avatars. Avatars are digital characters guided by real-world "players" through their computers. These colourful fantasy personas float through Second Life's tidy, brightly-lit space in search of something to do. The three-dimensional modeling is crude, compared to movie CGI, but very cool. You can move in around and through objects, talk and play with other avatars. You can build complex environments and relationships. Cleniuk explains that for dedicated inhabitants the experience is vivid and addictive.

On opposite walls of Neutral Ground's main gallery are projections from two terminals at the room's center. The first features *Caerleon Project(ions)*, an archive of sixteen cyber-sculptures curated by Nonnatus Korhonen and Andrew Burrell. The works exist on an island, a second Eden, an aesthetic oasis apart from the corruption of Second Life. Many of the works are formalist, geometric, Modernist. Some are accompanied by low hum sounds for that other-worldly trance effect. Avatars are meant to stand in front of these machines and groove. The aesthetic is unabashedly old-school: non-objective, form-is-content . . . and pretty boring.

Cleniuk's *Wind Song Machine* is more promising. A grid of glass filaments wave in the virtual wind like a field of wheat and make subtle sounds like an Aeolian harp. Avatars can glide up and touch a series of black triangles to add to the sounds. The instrument does not have much range, but it is pleasant.

The gallery is covered with turf. Cleniuk explains that the grass is an attempt to create a more vivid link between the virtual and real worlds. The border between art and life was a battleground for many artists, curators and philosophers in the second half of the twentieth century. The debate was more or less settled by a truce–anything can be art, as long as it is curated, connected to a gallery and written about. However, in the twenty-first century, the debate has a twist: what are the boundaries of art in the virtual world?

It was Marshall McLuhan who argued that new media is haunted by the architecture of media past. Many of the first things made in a new media are weak because they imitate the look of a previous form and do not construct new a fresh aesthetics to engage the new media. Such works are often made by technicians who have some understanding of the new medium but not much of the old and therefore produce pastiches. New media works that do engage and move us have compelling content to match their innovative form. The artists of *Caerleon Project(ions)*, have chosen to retreat from Second Life to create a "utopian community." As a result, the work is generic, has little content or connection to the world. The project seems to miss the boat. Perhaps Second Life's messier realm of social relations is more like a work of art and this refugee island is more like a museum.

Cleniuk's *Wind Song Machine*, her *sodding* the gallery and constructing this work as an installation in real space, rather than just in a virtual one, is an attempt to blur the boundary between these two realms. The piece is tentative, owing more than is necessary to a vacuous Modernism, but on the road to something exciting. □