

Rewind



VERA FRENKEL *The Institute™: Or, What We Do for Love* 2003
Web-based installation MICRO OVERSOUND

Vera Frenkel

◀◀ CARLETON UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY, OTTAWA

So, you're an artist *d'un certain âge*, and, unlike your peers in other professions, you have no pension plan to support you in your golden years. The inconveniences of housekeeping are mounting, and you'd like to have easier access to health care, studio space and exercise facilities. You dream of membership in a community of creative types, a sort of Banff or Yaddo where you can stay on indefinitely as long as you pay the rent. If this describes you, you may want to consider taking up residence in a branch of The National Institute for the Arts, also known as The Institute™.

This is Vera Frenkel's proposal in *The Institute™: Or, What We Do for Love*, a Web site and gallery installation most recently on display at Carleton University Art Gallery. Pairing former hospital buildings, made available by inadequate funding for health care, with former cultural workers, made available by inadequate funding for the arts, The Institute™ provides residential care for artists who are "over 50 years of age and in the full bloom of their creativity." The premise is utopian, responding to our longing to be cared for and taken care of in ways that respect our needs and identities.

But interwoven with the "official" content of the Web site—mission statements, staff bios and descriptions of idyllic excursions—are a variety of threads through which the real, dysfunctional life of The Institute™ emerges. Through policy statements and memos we gradually become aware of The Institute™'s manipulation of its residents; as it persuades them to bequeath their archives to the in-house library and contemplates claiming copyright to all artworks produced under its auspices. We can chat online with the inmates themselves, whose sometimes cryptic responses reveal a degree of petulance and idiosyncrasy that suggests things have gone a bit unhinged. (When I ask "Adrian" how much he pays for rent, he replies, "I think suicide bombers adhere passionately to beliefs I cannot

fathom and I almost envy the intensity of their believing in anything that much [though not in that way].²⁰)

In exploring the Web site, we fall through a series of rabbit holes into fragments of narrative about life at The Institute™'s Hamilton, Ontario, branch (inaugurated by Sheila Copps in a speech presented on the site). A threesome of residents have finagled their way in, despite their lack of artistic credentials, so as to pursue their unconventional sexual relationship in a convenient setting.

Another, disturbed after her studio is broken into, is discovered in a sub-basement after a lengthy search, working away with therapeutic obsessiveness on a painting about the event. A resident finds himself trapped when the elevator key goes missing, since the stairwells are unfinished; another seeks to investigate the daily emission of a mysterious gas that is monitored by tight-lipped, white-coated scientists.

Frenkel's mastery of a variety of idioms, ranging from the insipidly bureaucratic to the absurdly lyrical, is remarkable, and the project is as much literary, even theatrical, as it is visual. The gallery installation is presumably intended to contribute to this theatricality by providing a *mise en scène* through which we gain a sense of The Institute™ as physical site. Thus it incorporates couches and chairs, potted plants, coat racks, mismatched teacups, old art magazines and bronze plaques stating official policies. But any sense of immersion in The Institute™ is undercut by the obtrusive presence of the Web site, and artifacts derived from it, everywhere one looks. Each seating area is oriented toward a large screen on which the Web site is projected. On the walls hang a variety of digital prints, most of which consist of composites of images and text from the Web site. And throughout the space one finds several computer stations on which the Web site is presented. Virtually everything in the space thus points one back to, or requires for its appreciation, an exploration of the Web site.

In a way this is just as well, since the site contains many riches, including audio versions of songs written by Institute™ staff members and the full text of lectures by visiting artists and scholars (all of whom do exist and did deliver these lectures, although not at The Institute™). The site has a feeling of expansiveness, even inexhaustibility, to it, partly because of the unintuitive navigation: following a link may lead one to a completely unexpected destination, and this gives the sense of wandering along an endlessly forking path that sometimes loops back upon itself. Further development is planned by Frenkel and her project manager, Mark Jones. There are more songs, lectures and "private" social worker's reports in the works, along with additional residents to chat with and refinements to the chat application (which, though not very sophisticated as artificial-intelligence technologies go, pleases by the texture of individual responses it produces).

If you have missed the gallery installations, do not despair. The Institute™ lives on at www.the-national-institute.org. And perhaps, if a hospital building and a few cultural workers become available, a new branch will open near you. SHERRI IRVIN

**FRENKEL'S
MASTERY OF
A VARIETY
OF IDIOMS,
FROM INSIPIDLY
BUREAUCRATIC
TO LYRICAL,
IS REMARKABLE**