

## MELBOURNE INTERNATIONAL ARTS FESTIVAL

## Lucid screams to stir the nation's soul

## VISUAL ARTS

## Forty-Part Motet

Janet Cardiff. Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne.

## Turbulent

Shirin Neshat. ACCA.

## Being in and out of love too many times itself makes you harder to love

Muntean and Rosenblum. ACCA, until December 5.

## Thinking Out Loud

Heide 11, Heide Museum of Modern Art, Bulleen. Until November 28.

THE voice of fundamentalist Christian moralism may be one that is heard in Australia when a vote is required, but its simplistic and sclerotic conservative influence seems to have spread through the nerve fibres of the national psyche like root rot in a botanical garden.

Thank God — ironically — for the voices that have been heard over the past few weeks at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art. Animal-like and angelic, these voices test out the height and depth of human desire way beyond our banal political prescriptions for lower interest rates the phobic monologue on our country's security.

ACCA's visual arts contribution to the Melbourne International Arts Festival's theme of voice this year was a series of soundscapes. Despite the minimal styling of these sculptural, spatial arrangements of speech, text and song, they have an emotional density that can be transporting.

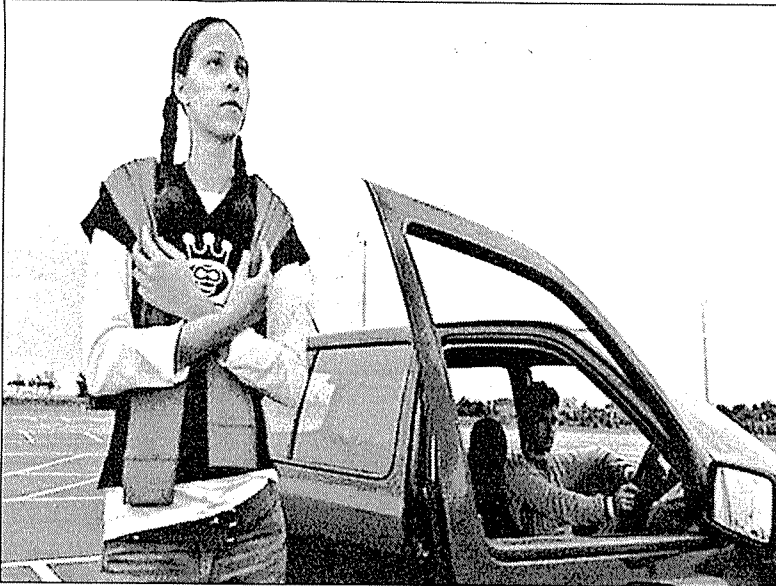
Janet Cardiff's *Forty-Part Motet* — a devotional piece by the 16th-century composer Thomas Tallis — was recorded in Salisbury cathedral on 40 separate tracks, one for each of the choir's singers. When these are played back through 40 separate speakers at head-height on metal stands, intricately sound-balanced and arranged in the centre of an immense bare gallery, the clarity and the depth of the sound is rapturous. Audiences swim blissed-out in the corralled and choral space, but the feeling induced is more like the exhilaration of an IMAX movie than nostalgia for religious ceremony.

While it's undeniably an engulfing experience, it's also atomising and unnerving. The quasi-religious ecstasy is built on a science-fiction device — the suspicion that these anonymous techno-sentinels may be lulling us into a simulated spirituality, as supermarket muzak does. Maybe these transcendent voices are actually demonic.

That was the revelation in Shirin Neshat's monumental video installation, *Turbulence*, shown at ACCA before Cardiff's. The audience was captured between two huge screens hanging in empty space. On one, an Iranian man, dressed in austere black pants and white shirt, croons a mystical love song by the medieval Sufi poet Rumi in front of a restrained assembly of male clerics or students. He finishes to moderate applause and then, as if in a hip-hop



Ominous: Neshat's *Turbulent* is a virtual song contest played on two huge screens, with the audience captured between them



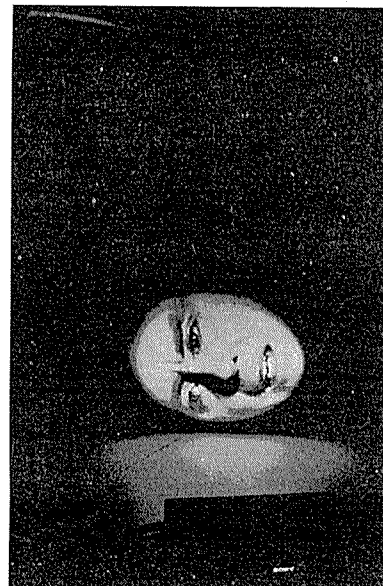
Adolescent hopes: Muntean and Rosenblum's *To Die For*

battle, a female figure dressed in the Persian burqa, who has been waiting silently and ominously on the opposite screen, suddenly responds.

But her song comes as a rush of raw, feral noises from her throat, like a chaos of birdsong, sirens and car crashes. It leaves her male opponent speechless and paralysed, staring across at her above the equally stunned gallery audience. Looming out of the dark with her mouth open as she wails into her microphone, the woman makes for an image as iconic and agitating as that other famously primordial

scream painted by Edvard Munch, also showing in Melbourne.

Across town, far from any gallery environment, there is more screaming. The gates at the bottom of the steps down to the crypt-like underground public toilet, in Gordon Reserve near Parliament House, are now locked. With good reason. A chorus of a thousand wordless angels, electronically attenuated to an infinitely rising pitch, streams up out of the ground like a legion of mad souls fleeing their opened graves. David Chesworth and Sonia Leber's *Gordon*



Hatching a plot: *Thinking Out Loud*

*Assumption* is the soundscape for a ferocious resurrection.

Is this like judgment day in a gothic horror movie? Is the city disgorging its dead from the sewers? Where Cardiff turns the sacred toward technological euphoria, Chesworth and Leber, like necromancers, wind up supernatural effects from the mundane fabric of the city and unleash an unholy version of the heavenly host.

Further out of town, and lying like a forsaken soul on the floor of an empty room at the Heide

Museum, is Tony Oursler's *Incubator*: a head-sized egg with a video of the artist's pallid face projected on to it, muttering an endless monologue. It turns brooding, plaintive and accusatory, a macabre and funny animation of the ghost in the machine. Or maybe a creepy vision of something waiting to be hatched.

The complaints voiced by Oursler's decapitated head are lushly theatrical next to the wry, ultra-cool flat-lining pop psychology and self-conscious ennui of Markus Muntean and Adi Rosenblum's cast of slacker teens back at ACCA. In the video *To Die For*, a majestic slow track through a shopping mall's deserted car park takes us past skaters and mallrats posed in motionless tableaux that vaguely resemble scenes from famous religious paintings. A zoned-out female voice delivers a recitative over languid pastoral music, speculating on the enigmas of adolescent love, life and hope.

The dark tribal passions of ancient rage and lust that drench Neshat's work are transfigured into exquisitely mannered half-thoughts here. What is it to feel you are immortal, and have so little to live for?

Sad to say, in this increasingly conservative and prosaic Australian society, voices as complex and vigorous, as fantastic and exciting as these may begin to sound incomprehensibly foreign.

Edward Colless

## Operatic chuckles for young and old

NEW Opera and its many possibilities was the focus of the final week of the Melbourne Festival, with the premiere of two Australian chamber works, *Midnite* and *Cosmonaut*.

*Midnite*, based on Randolph Stow's 1967 novel, is the story of an orphan boy in Western Australia who, with the help of five animal friends, becomes a famous, if inept,

## NEW OPERA

## Midnite

By Raffaele Marcellino and Doug MacLeod. Athenaeum Theatre, Melbourne, October 22.

## Cosmonaut

By David Chesworth and Tony MacGregor. CUB Malthouse, Melbourne. October 21.

ogy of recent modern operas, it's a joy to hear unamplified singing.

The production, by OzOpera and Adelaide's Windmill Performing Arts, is colourful and inventive, making the most of the animal characters and having fun with the imposing figure of Queen Victoria. *Midnite* is probably a little dense for its target audience and could lose a character or slow down

tres on the bizarre story of Soviet cosmonaut Sergei Krikalev who, when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, was left stranded in space, circling the Earth with no country to return to, or to take responsibility for his fate.

*Cosmonaut* has some wonderful ideas at its core but fails to realise its potential. All the elements of

