Deirdre Logue
by Terence Dick

of the Dead, and raises inside our own heads old archetypes in the unconscious. The dark schemata of the soldiers’ faces reminds us that the representation in Indian temples of Shiva-Durga was of a skeleton or stick figure wearing a dark cloak.

During a first look at the work there was the sense that Abdessem was attempting to add “deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars,” in the words of Martin Luther King Junior, but the longer we spent there, the more we understood that spectacle or divertissement were not at issue, but that the artist was pivoting towards indictment and critique, and shining an unforgiving light on the relentless violence and dynamism of our time. He ushered the figures out of the shadows and named them like jackals, calling them out and down.

This exemplary exhibition is an integral part of the Year for Peace at the museum, an expansive program of activities and exhibitions launched in November 2016 following the inauguration of the Michal and Renata Hornstein Pavilion for Peace. Michal and Renata Hornstein were important museum patrons and Holocaust survivors who immigrated to Canada, just as Kim Phúc did. Kim Phúc, this remarkable and courageous survivor, now lives in Ontario and works as a UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador.

“Conflict” was exhibited at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts from February 16 to May 7, 2017.

James D Campbell is a writer and curator in Montreal, and is a frequent contributor to Border Crossings.

Twenty years. That’s a long time for an artist. If you ever get a survey covering two decades of your work, that puts you, at the very least, mid-career. And that’s for the few who hit the ground running right out of art school. Most artists are only starting to figure themselves out after graduation. Then there’s a year or five of day jobs to pay down loans plus a master’s degree when you finally realize what your thing is. So, let’s say you don’t make anything you feel good about until your late 20s or even into your 30s. Add two decades to that and you’re getting up there. Early senior, even. Now, if you factor in the post-emerging artist exhibition void when the zeitgeist is no longer in line with your practice so no one is programming anything new from you, those 20 years can stretch to forever. Do you wait until the cycle of fashion circles around in your direction once more, strive to cross paths with a sympathetic curator or just keep plugging away?

Filmmaker and video artist Deirdre Logue took the latter Sisyphean trajectory and, 20 years later, celebrated her china anniversary in a trio of synchronized exhibitions in Toronto titled “Notes from the Worry Room” at A Space, “Double Double” at Gallery 44 and “Admiring All We Accomplish” (in collaboration with VibraFusionLab) at Tangled Art Gallery. This trip down memory lane also coincided with a Canadian Artist Spotlight screening at the 2017 Images Festival (which Logue, in her self-aware way, gave over to artists who influenced her) and the publication of the 11-essay catalogue Beyond Her Usual Limits: The Film and Video Works of Deirdre Logue, 1997 to 2017 by all of the above, minus Tangled Art Gallery, plus Oakville Galleries and Open Space Arts Society. The assembled evidence is a testament to her ongoing artistic output over those years (and anyone with even a passing awareness of Toronto’s experimental film/video scene will also know of her essential administrative work at the Images Festival, CFMDC and Vtape), but what makes all that work an oeuvre worthy of retrospection?

There are certain things in Logue’s practice that stay consistent from pre-2000 to just this past year. First worth mentioning is that her works are short. In an aesthetic milieu where long and “not much happening” is common currency, her films and videos are compact and action-packed. That action might consist of road licking, fish
feeding or basketball balancing, but there is always something happening and it happens relatively quickly. The brevity of set-up prior to payoff is essential because the art is activated only after the first viewing. Once you’ve witnessed the climax or observed what she’s trying to make happen, each subsequent viewing, each repetition, is fraught with anticipation; each action becomes its own little drama and each work heightens the viewer’s experience of time each time the work is re-viewed.

Repetition is another consistent factor. Logue has the same haircut and is presumably the same person from one shot to the next. She’s always on screen, often silent, largely deadpan, doing things that in other contexts might be considered pointless, over and over again: squirming under a mattress, buttoning and unbuttoning her shirt, climbing onto a desk. Art is that human endeavour (besides simply existing) that most often elicits the question: “What’s the point?” Artists are those rare few who don’t let that question discourage them. To do the unjustified and inexplicable again and again is the gamble each artist takes every time they endeavour to make something new. The success, failure or point of that thing only begins to reveal itself once it’s done. Even then, years can go by before a satisfactory understanding is reached. Pull an arbitrary number out of a hat—20, for example—and then look back after that many years and ask again, “What’s the point?” If there is still no conclusive answer, you’ve probably got some art on your hands.

What kind of person can defer resolutions for 20 years and still be open to answers? Survey exhibitions like Logue’s are ostensibly about the art and the answers. They provide ample opportunity to consider each work as a complement to the others, to trace the outline of a unifying aesthetic, to name the forest made by these trees. The generous catalogue of essays that accompanies this particular exhibition provides plenty of answers from curators, fellow artists and film programmers. The essays appeal to art history and link her to performance and video artists like Vito Acconci and Bruce Nauman. They apply psychoanalysis and evaluate her as a body, a psyche or a collection of compulsive actions. They consider her queer identity and throw around words like “self-portraiture.” Amidst all these interpretations is the repressed inclination to judge the artist. Who did this? Who would do this? Is that Deirdre Logue on all those screens? Is that really her?

What kind of a person is she and what has she done with her life?

Twenty years. What’s remarkable is how little you change. Behaviours are set early on, before you’re even aware of them, and then the patterns reveal themselves as you look back over 5 years, 10, 15. The older you get, the more you have to look at and the more you recognize. Retrospectives invite introspection. Logue’s survey reveals the intended repetition within a work while it loops, and then pulls back the curtain as each work echoes the last. Is this consistency or complacency? Is it a matter of an artist with only one idea or one who has spent the past two decades refining that idea over and over again? Is she trying again, failing again, but failing better? Samuel Beckett won the Nobel Prize for losing wrestling matches with the absurdity of transcendence, but it didn’t stop him from trying again. There’s pointless repetition (our bad habits, for example), and then there’s pointlessness repeated (mouthing a balloon, walking through a willow tree, bandaging fingers) that serves as an instructive microcosm for mortal pointlessness (you live until you die) and metaphysical pointlessness (the universe grinds on with or without you). We spend our lives rolling the same boulder up the same hill over and
over again. Most of us are “lucky” enough not to have that thrown in our faces with an exhibition of what we’ve accomplished over our adult lives. Inexplicably, there are some who find grace in what causes us torment. They grasp at the possibility of repeating something pointless until it becomes meaningful. They make it their life’s work.

“Notes from the Worry Room” was exhibited at A Space, Toronto, from April 4 to May 13, 2017; “Double Double” was exhibited at Gallery 44, Toronto, from April 4 to April 29, 2017; and “Admiring All We Accomplish” (in collaboration with VibraFusionLab) was exhibited at Tangled Art Gallery, Toronto, from April 7 to June 30, 2017.

Terence Dick is a writer and art critic. He is the Toronto correspondent and editor for the contemporary art review at www.akimbo.ca.

We learn much from the scant published words of Marisa Merz, the Italian artist who, at age 90, is having her debut North American retrospective. In a 1975 interview with French critic Annemarie Sauzeau-Boetti, Merz discusses her interest in the sensation of transparency, remarking, “It’s not just a visual thing, transparency.” Her language—like her work in sculpture, installation, drawing and painting—exceeds the denotative, exceeds its own visuality. She composes a porous space where material properties are things felt as they fold into and out of myriad lyric associations. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Merz is a prolific author of poetry, and her apartment (which she continues to use functionally as a studio to this day) is said to abound with scrawled bits of verse scattered among her drawings and accumulated ephemera. “Marisa Merz: