

Yvonne Buchanan

The end of a life

Love in an Elevator (2001, 17 minutes, black and white 16 mm, sound)

Remains: The body is fragile. The opening shot of Thea St.Omer's documentary film shows an elderly woman's hands, trembling, picking up a camcorder.

We see Joe, and hear him say, "Hello, Joe," coaxing someone to address him. The film, grainy, 16 mm in black and white, reminds us of the past, a past technology. The composition is askew; someone is struggling to get a view with this new technology. Jean Schwartz is recording Joe Viola, as he looks straight at her, through the camera. The filmmaker is allowing the couple control of the camera in this first scene and they speak to one another. "Can you see me?"

Joe, in his 80's, with a baseball cap above his round, sagging face, asks again, "Can you see me?" He is wearing his down vest over a plaid shirt. The filmmaker's voice, Thea's, floats in, instructing Jean on how to hold the camera, how to see through the viewfinder, and asking Jean if she can see Joe. The theme song of the television game show *Jeopardy* is playing on a television somewhere in the room.

Joe says, "Talk to me Jean." Then Joe gets a chance with the camera. There's a steadier shot of Jean in her dark woolen cap, still slightly off center, her head framed with a generous view of ceiling. She says, "Hello Joe." Her large glasses dwarf her pinched face. "You look beautiful," he says.

The couple's voice-over narration serves to introduce them: Joseph Francis Viola and Jean Lillian Schwartz.

There's an exterior shot of a six-story building. We are in New York City, at a nursing home housed in that building.

Jean and Joe each begin their day separately and in different rooms. It's 8:32 in the morning and Jean is still sleeping in bed. Above her headboard is a cluster of children's drawings and photographs (grandchildren?). Silence lingers, except for her breathing and the subtle ticking of a clock; her sneakers lay under the bed.

Joe is in church this morning, listening to a sermon in a large hall used for Mass. He drifts in and out of sleep in his wheelchair. The priest is leading the congregation in the Lords' Prayer.

A nurse pulls a curtain across our view as Jean wakes up. It's 10:04 in the morning. In voice-over, Joe tells the story of meeting his wife, Jean, for the first time, on the stoop of her building forty years ago, while selling vegetables in the neighborhood. In the present again, Joe takes a Communion wafer on his tongue.

The curtain continues to block our view as the nurse speaks to Jean, cajoling her to sit up. Another nurse joins her and they struggle to hold Jean up, guiding her into her wheelchair. It takes a long time, this effort of dealing with an aged body. Thea records from outside the room, respectful of the moment's intimacy. The shot also provides a critical piece of information: Jean and Joe no longer live together. Finally sitting, Jean washes her face with a hand towel and the nurse combs her hair. We watch as Jean struggles to drink some water. It is an effort to swallow.

Joe is taking Communion. The priest says, "The body of Christ," and again we see Jean struggling to swallow.

Joe wheels himself into the elevator. With a walker and nurse's assistance, Jean makes her way down the hall. Her movements are awkward and perhaps painful, as she takes each step, slightly stumbling, her legs shaky and uncertain, her body thick and failing. There is a real effort. In the next shot Jean waits in her wheelchair at the elevator.

Thea is building character here, through sound (or its absence), visual texture and voice over, information about their belief systems, their habits, their physical and emotional challenges. Joe's voiceover tells us Lillian is Jewish, while he attends Catholic Mass. Joe is somewhat mobile; Lillian is more infirm physically and verbally. When the filmmaker alternates the character focus from scene to scene, she is giving us the context of this couple's lives.

The body is fragile. Jean waits in her wheelchair, looking pained. Joe gets off the elevator, and they kiss, as the camera goes slightly out of focus. At breakfast they eat scrambled eggs from a single spoon, he feeding her, then himself. Their feet intertwine under the table. Jean again struggles to swallow her food.

Jean and Joe play Bingo, an organized activity for the day. A young woman, the Bingo caller, announces the call. We see Joe and Jean leaning over their Bingo card. Thea's camera lingers over the other residents: a man with thick glasses lights up a cigarette, a woman in pearls adjusting her earrings. The caller announces a call again, banging her hand loudly on the table, the balls rattling in the spinner. The difference in the muffled sounds of the earlier scene and this one is jarring. Joe was sleeping, wakes from the pounding, then slips back to sleep.

Joe tells the story of falling from bed, trying to get to the phone, neighbors rescuing him and the ambulance bringing him to the hospital. He could not get up from the floor and Jean was too weak to help. Joe and Jean realized they could no longer live on their own. We understand now why he is here.

After Bingo, Joe sings, "When Your Old Wedding Ring Was New," accompanied on piano by a young man, perhaps a nursing home worker or volunteer. Joe's voice is strong. He has a surprisingly good voice, much stronger than his speaking voice when he narrates, or talks with Jean.

In the next scene Joe, Jean and Jean's daughter Betty are eating again. Betty is concerned about her mother eating enough and speaks sharply to Joe. There are two shots of Lillian struggling to swallow, intercut with Joe and Betty arguing.

Later, the day is full of music in a black and white world of diminishing pleasures. Another resident does a beautiful rendition of "Schattentanz" and "To a Wild Rose." Her deft fingers dance over the piano keys, her eyes lively in concentration.

In the hallway the couple enters the frame, first Joe, then Jean. They kiss good night and as they exit Jean asks if he's coming. Then the screen goes black. He answers, "Yes, tomorrow is another day, sweetheart," and we might think the film is over. Then, with the screen still black, we hear a voicemail left for the filmmaker by Jean's daughter.

"Thea, hi, this is Betty Schwartz. It's Friday, around 2:15. I just wanted to let you know the sad news my mother died last night. If you haven't been around the

nursing home. . .it was all very sudden. I know you really liked her and that's why I'm calling you. At some point in time, I would like to get a copy of some of the video or film that you have because it's a record of her life. . . .”

Thea lets the screen remains black for more seconds as we take in this new information. Again we see Jean and Joe bending into a kiss, the same kiss from the beginning of the film. The gesture is repeated but frozen mid-frame, not to be completed. We know she is gone. Death has separated them forever.

Thea St.Omer was a gifted documentarian with a sharp and gentle eye for moments filled with humanity. She had the patience to wait for moments to unfold, hands with a slight tremble grasping a cane, heads bowed to one side asleep, feet shuffling or stumbling across the floor, skeletal hands folded across a chest, or dancing over piano keys. She waited, recorded and let life unfold, capturing small gems of insight imperfect and genuine. I am left to wonder how she met this couple, and whether this film grew out of her relationship with Jean and Joe, or the relationship grew out of the film?

Thea St. Omer walked. She met many people during her walks. She was deeply curious about people and their stories, and possessed this gift to weave moments into compelling visual stories. I have arrived at this from multiple viewings of this film. Each time I am aware that what I thought was accidental, or even sloppy, was in fact a thoughtful decision leading into a richness of layered meaning. Decisions: from the choice of film stock, allowing the couple to record themselves, to the sound of the couple's voices. I am used to watching for the expected or the unexpected in a conventional and known way. This is a much denser film.

Viewing the film in the present, with the knowledge of Jean's death, guessing Joe has probably died, and mourning that Thea has died, you too might watch this film over and over again. What remains for us to contemplate: three lives, Joe, Jean, and Thea St.Omer.



Yvonne Buchanan is a video artist, Associate Professor in the School of Art and Design at Syracuse University, and co-founder and co-director of Talent Agency: Teen Art Portfolio Development. Her media works have screened in festivals and exhibition spaces including Slamdance In-

ternational Film Festival in Park City, UT, Syracuse International Film Festival, Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, Squeaky Wheel Media Center in Buffalo, Site: Santa Fe, Hammer Museum/ UCLA, Studio Museum in Harlem, Munson Williams Proctor Museum of Art in Utica, Real Art Ways, SUNY Brockport, SUNY Oswego, Memorial Art Gallery/ University of Rochester, Bard College, Muhlenberg College, Disjecta Contemporary Art Center in Portland, OR, Urban Video Project in Syracuse, and Rencontres Internationales Paris/Berlin. A native of New York City, she has lived in Syracuse for 12 years.