

“Les pistes sonores de Janet Cardiff”

INTERVIEW WITH JANET CARDIFF BY CORINNA GHAZNAVI

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Janet Cardiff has worked with audio since 1989, incorporating sound into her installations, and developing what has become her own unique art form: the audio walk. Created site-specifically, the listener is invited to take a disc-man, put on headphones and walk in the artist's footsteps, with her voice as a guide. “Turn left here” the voice tells us in Oakville Gairloch Gardens (“A Large Slow River” 2000, Canada), “there are a series of steps, walk down them” and sure enough, the description is accurate and the voice, transmitted through binaural sound, is so close that we feel the presence of someone else though we are entirely alone. Cardiff records sounds that regularly occur in the paths she chooses, she records her own narrating voice and further, adds sounds relating to her musings: a helicopter, an aria. Her pieces most intensely work with our perceptions and our mind: tilting our reality such that we risk losing our ability to differentiate the real from what her recorded voice tells us. We hear words spoken directly behind us and whip around to find emptiness; we hear gulls calling and look up and see them. When we stand in front of the water, smashing against the rocks, we hear the real and the recorded waves. Weaving drama around the ubiquitous, juxtaposing reality with fiction, Cardiff lures us into a parallel world.

Since the mid-nineties Cardiff has been exhibiting widely and internationally. Locations for her walks include Artangel in London, the MOMA, the Carnegie International, the Sao Paulo Biennale, Muenster Sculpture Projects, Wanas, Sweden, and the SF MOMA. Throughout her practice she has collaborated often with artist and partner George Bures Miller who has his own kinetic sculpture practice. In his work we see the same interest in skewing reality and throwing us off balance: Simple Experiments in Aerodynamics shows a series of mixed media sculptures such as a floor lamp, suspended from the ceiling, swinging wildly in wide arcs through the space. Jump is viewed on a monitor suspended on chains: the video shows a pair of feet jumping, and with each impact the monitor vibrates. Together, Cardiff and Miller will be representing Canada at the Venice Biennial in 2001.

I spoke with Cardiff October 3, 2000 in her Berlin apartment where she is currently on a DAAD artist's residency. In addition to the Canadian pavilion in Venice, Cardiff was working on several projects including an audio installation piece inspired by “Spem In Alium” by sixteenth century composer Thomas Tallis. Cardiff and producer Field Art Projects (London) have hired a choir in order to record each of the 40 singers separately. Afterwards she will have each voice play on one of forty speakers spread throughout an exhibition space. Moving through the installation, the listener will be able to untangle what is usually one harmonized piece, and listen to the changing nuances of the complex composition, as one moving amongst a choir; like the audio walks, it will pursue Cardiff's interest in creating a sculptural soundscape completely involving the participant. Further, she is preparing a major survey show at PS1 for the fall of 2001, and a video walk for the SF MOMA premiering March 2001.

CG: Let's talk about your collaborative work with George Bures Miller.

JC: George and I have been together for a long time. Our common interest in filmic practices started us collaborating even before we had our first date. As to authorship of pieces, it's really hard to tell when you're sleeping together, living together, eating together what is one persons idea and what's another persons.

Generally we each have our own separate practice and then we have works or installations that we collaborate on as well. Even in our separate works there is some crossover. The audio walks are under my name but George's input is a big part of them.

I do the script writing and recording and he works as the main editor. It's the same kind of collaboration that a producer might have with a musician. There are often difficulties with

sporadic collaboration rather than being a fulltime team. It can be confusing. Traditionally the artworld has tried to define artists as if they were a product. When we collaborate it's like mixing two brands, like trying to sell Tide with Ajax which product is it? But a little confusion is good I think. As well, people are getting more used to individual artists collaborating occasionally everything is becoming a bit looser ...But even working on our individual stuff, George and I have always felt like a team. We really own each other's work, have become attached to each other's work, we care about it.

C.G. You were asked to collaborate in Venice?

J.C. Yes. The piece follows the interests of our collaborative works, "The Muriel Lake Incident" and "Dark Pool" in that it's about transporting the viewer/participant into a fictional space removed from the art environment that it's placed in. Physically it will be a structure created in hyper perspective so that when you are inside it will seem like you're sitting in the balcony of a large theatre. One thing we're interested in is how a physical space made out of cardboard and wood can replicate and be transformed into simulating the experience of being in a real life size cinema. A trompe d'oeil experience. Also we're interested in how the sound and video image will further work with the perceptions of your body to verify and contradict that imagined space. It should be a very playful piece.

CG: How is it that audio can transport you into an entirely imagined place?

J.C. As listeners we are all very good at recognizing the spatial properties of sound. We know the difference between the soundscape of an outdoor location versus an indoor one or a large space compared to a small one. It's the reverberations of the sound we recognize in these spaces. As well, bodily associations are strong with some sounds, like if you play a recording of seagulls squawking by the sea you feel almost physically transported to the seaside when you listen to it. Our bodies remember through the sound if that makes any sense.

CG: Experiencing your work as a listener emphasizes that memory is subjective and not determined; and that fantasies can be become so tangible that the unreal becomes real.

J.C.- One of my interests in working with sound is to make the ephemeral seem physical or solid. I'm using a virtual medium only it's re-played in a real physical environment, layering one reality over another. A strange bi-product is that the hyper quality of the binaural recording tends to accentuate the vision of the listeners. People may walk down the same street over and over but when they do my piece on that street they say, oh, I never noticed that before. Also recording and replaying sound makes you realize that you normally don't hear 99% of what's really there because your mind just shuts off. It has to. It's a filtering system that we can't survive without.

CG: The medium of audio transports you in time as well. For the listener time is not linear: they hear a past recording describing say, a sunny day, although it is rainy in their present. Then certain things occur just as they hear them described. And on top of that, there is the reality, and memory - past and present - of the participator themselves.

JC- When I first started working with audio I was drawn into questions that the medium itself seemed to raise. Like those dealing with time, memory and space. I think the medium definitely influenced the content of the walks. Because of it's fluidity a narrative suspended in a virtual medium rather than words on a page has a way of disappearing and being lost and misinterpreted that mimics real life. A ten second bit of sound can seem much longer or shorter depending on what you are hearing. In a different way time can be mixed, such as if I record the sound of a carriage and horses' hooves and layer it next to the sound of a car. It's like two worlds, past and present juxtaposed... but at the same time it's still ALL past because it's recorded. Of

course while you walk you can hear the present sounds in the environment around you mixing with the recorded ones so you're just in a mish mash of timelines.

CG: A certain eeriness occurs when the past and present mix that way. Is it a natural next step to include mystery and crime elements to heighten that?

JC: The Missing Voice in London pointed out to me why I have a tendency to work with that type of subject. When I'm in a strange city my mind is constantly inventing scenarios. I imagine all these incredibly violent scenes - detective scenes - because I've seen so many movies and read so many stories and novels. The mundane in life gets built up into being a mystery. We invent little stories that have no relation to reality, but we layer them on top of reality anyway. You see a man walking down the street with a dog and then somehow you've got a story for him. I recognize a certain type of alleyway and it reminds me of a movie so I add movie soundtrack to heighten that experience.

CG: It can be frightening. Because of this tilted perceptiveness there is a threatening aspect to your walks.

JC: I think it accentuates the idea that we all have a different perception of reality. Episodes of listening to friends talk about an incident makes you realize that no one really sees the incident, everyone is just inventing reality as they go along. Even with video you're interpreting all the time. I'm interested in how a medium like an audio walk, which is normally didactic, can just jump ship and cross over into any other medium: it becomes literature, theatre, and performance art. It's a hybrid of many different things.

C.G. When I thought back at it I remembered things that weren't in the walk. The listener makes up stories along with you.

J.C. One reason I use genres derived from pop culture is that they play into what people know. Listeners have a whole history of seeing detective movies and reading Raymond Chandler, so if I say one line, they're there before me, they're inventing, they have all the other references, I don't even need to go there.

C.G. This heightens the suspense and makes you want to stay with it.

J.C. Sometimes I let people down because they realize at the end there is no answer. But to me it's so much about the experience. You're walking with someone who is thinking aloud. It always amazes me how you can listen to the sound of a violin or a symphony playing a piece in your mind or even a singer singing perfectly on key, but you can never voice it or hum in tune. I try to translate this ability of my mind to create this complete virtual world. It makes sense that there would be an accordion player walking by or a singer standing next to you, because you can conjure that up in your mind.

C.G. Your work is a virtual within a physical reality, so you have a dual reality.

J.C. Kitty Scott wrote that my audio walks are "a soundtrack for the physical world" [Kitty Scott in Kynaston McShine, ed., *The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect*, MOMA, N.Y., 1999]. The physical world becomes the visuals of a movie. I would have a hard time translating my work to film because it's relying on the ability to create images in the listener's mind, and I can't make the best images. If I say, "man is walking down the street," we all know that everyone's going to see the scene differently. Every time a person does an audio walk they are making that work, and the weird thing is that some people are better at making things than others. Some participants come back and tell me that three or four things happened at the same time: that there were geese

flying over just when you heard the geese, that there was a man in a red shirt standing just where I said he was and it's spooky for me, it almost makes you believe in the sci-fi stories about abilities to manipulate time and space. When I first started making the walks, I was interested in the didactic information - using a tour - and I thought I was subverting that by using a female intimate voice. But experiencing the work has taught me that that's not what is interesting. The relevant issues are more about perception.

C.G. I think there's a certain amount of risk for the listener to trust you. You feel like you can't hear the other things that are real.

J.C. The courage of the listeners amazes me; their trust in putting on the headphones and figuring that they'll get somewhere. Sometimes I let them down; I leave them stranded some place. They're disappointed because they've developed a relationship with my voice and suddenly they lose it. I think the surrogate relationship is important. The disk-man allows me to have some sort of connection to the viewer. They become a bit of a cyborg, because they've got this headphone attached, or a camera attached, and they're watching a video screen, and they're walking in the footsteps of another. The disc-man is known for excluding others but I think also that using the device is a way of having conversations. It's one-sided - I'm talking to them - but it's fairly open. They feel some connection. People have asked me, is it really important to have your voice on the tape ñ and in way I'd like to have more actors but also I like it being me. It's kind of like the music industry: you become attached to the singer's voice and they have a connection to the audience that visual artists don't.

CG: Using your own voice underlines the precarious aspect of reality and fiction, of defined time and space; for every time the listener hears it, it is both familiar and completely different.

JC: You realize that it's not just autobiography; some people think that I'm telling the truth but I'm not. I'm living another whole life.