

Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller
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NEW YORK—Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller are among the most consistently imaginative of new media artists. For years, Cardiff was best known for her audio walks: curated tours in which audience members would each be given a set of headphones from which they heard instructions as to where to walk and, equally important, fictional asides that interrupted or added nuance to the walked reality. The soundtracks for these walks, and a number of Cardiff and Miller's later works, are recorded in binaural sound with microphones that are attached to a full-size model of a human head. The result is so accurately captured and so eerily realistic that, listening to it, you find yourself entirely convinced by the aural illusion: Someone whispers in your ear or runs past you and you turn your head to see them. The experience is simultaneously total and alienating, almost as if you've been granted intimate access to another person's mind.

Cardiff and Miller have proven themselves perennially inventive and quick-witted artists: Sound recording techniques pioneered in the walks, in addition to the many other audio techniques that they have explored, have been used in installation pieces that viewers physically enter, and Cardiff and Miller have evolved a whole area of sound, video, and installation works that is uniquely their own. They employ such diverse forms as slide shows, telephone conversations, choral recitals, canoe trips, and torture chambers to seduce their audience into illusory worlds that seem utterly compelling, but which they then rather playfully disrupt. Movie projectors appear to malfunction, the couple discuss a series of projected slides but then start arguing about how the audience is meant to understand them, or an invisible man, detected only by his shadow, replaces the stylus on a long-playing record. The result is at once utterly engaging, and entertainingly and self-consciously counterfeit.

The duo currently has a retrospective exhibition, "The Killing Machine, and Other Stories 1995–2007," on view at the Insitut Mathildenhöhe in Darmstadt, Germany. The show debuted at the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA) and tours to the Miami Art Museum this fall, and it is accompanied by a remarkable publication—almost as multi-layered as their walks and installations—which includes a DVD of videos of some of their better-known pieces. In addition, their 2005 installation work *Opera for a Small Room* will be included in the exhibition "Voice and Void," which opens in September at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, Conn.

Cardiff and Miller spoke to ARTINFO from their studio in British Columbia, where they are preparing new work.

Janet, George, I'm fascinated by how you intertwine reality and illusion in your work. Your installation *The Paradise Institute* (2001), for example, looks like a couple of packing cases from the outside, but once you go inside and put the headphones on, you're in an old-fashioned cinema.

Janet Cardiff: George often calls it a "cinema-simulator"...

George Bures Miller: It's the full cinema experience: the audience around you, the friend beside you...

...the plush seats. And then you're transported.

Except you're constantly tripping the simulation up.

Yeah, exactly. We're fascinated by pulling the rug out from under the viewer. We create a reality within a piece, like the model cinema in *The Muriel Lake Incident* (1999), but then at

one point it appears as if the film is breaking, so the viewer has to think about the technology of the piece. They realize that they're not inside the story anymore and think, "Oh, I'm viewing an installation piece."

You offer them illusions that they don't necessarily understand but can discover.

Everyone experiences the piece in different ways. We try to put multiple layers in there to allow that. We definitely try to get to the third or fourth reality, but I'm not sure that every viewer gets there.

There's a moment in *Playhouse* (1997) when the imaginary audience suddenly starts counting.

*Yeah, when you have the binaural audio simulating an audience counting all around them, people want to be part of that. Everybody wants to participate in a situation like that, but we also create a sense of alienation to make people feel a little uncomfortable, like in *Playhouse* when the audience starts laughing at the singer. You're not supposed to do that to a performer...*

But she behaves like it's a perfectly reasonable response.

That's part of our storytelling technique. We throw in these MacGuffins. We use them not so much in the Hitchcockian sense of keeping the plot moving, but to keep the audience's brains moving. The audience has to think about them and wonder what it is and why—"Why is the [virtual] audience counting?" They make up a story for themselves, and that generates this whole other reality.

So much in your work is fleeting. Something appears briefly, and almost before the audience can register it, it's gone. So I wonder how you feel about the video versions of your pieces. People can run the video forward and back, and the pieces become much more transparent.

We talked about that, whether it was appropriate or not. That's the catch-22 of documentation. It's difficult to have catalogues of our work, because it's time-based and performance-oriented. The video doesn't show the whole story, for sure; when people go to the real physical piece they experience something completely different. But we always design our work for ourselves, and we don't like to get bored. So we design things that you're supposed to see a couple of times over...

...or more...

...so that you can unravel it.

Some of your pieces begin one way, and by the time they finish, they've turned into something completely different. *Opera for a Small Room* starts as a quiet, contemplative piece and ends up as a rock opera.

As we edit we always follow our intuitions and our feelings. What do we feel we need next? It's like when you're doing a drawing—you need juxtapositions. Or like making a good meal: "Mmm, what do I feel like now?"

Janet and I have different stories as to what actually goes on in the opera. What goes on in the piece is not set in stone. That opens it up for the audience to develop their own stories as well. It's boring for people if it's obvious.

Your work is full of references to other art forms. There's a lot of "art about art"

around these days, but it seems to me that your art is more about the delight of experiencing art.

Yeah. Or the delight of just experiencing.

I don't really think our work is "art about art" at all. We're more fascinated by the entertaining arts, so it could be art about...

...magic...

...or about dance, or film, or theater. Those are the things that inspire us. We're interested in what goes on in your brain when you're at the theater or at the dance, when you're in those moments of engagement, those moments of euphoria, those moments of complete...

...suspension of disbelief.

Your work is technically sophisticated, but it's never about technology. And yet you do seem to have this fascination with rather eccentric scientists' laboratories or inventors' workshops.

*Yeah, in *The Dark Pool* (1995), which was our first formal collaboration, there are many different layers to the story and theme. There's a whole fiction about this invented place called "the Dark Pool," but George and I have often thought it's also like a laboratory for senselessness. In some ways art is just that—two people working in a room, creating a room; they're artists, but they're scientists...*

...But their experiments have no purpose. *The Dark Pool* is all about that. It's a purposeless investigation into things that really matter.