

## **The Murder of Crows, 2008**

by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev

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*"La fantasía abandonada de la razón, produce monstruos imposibles: unida con ella, es madre de las artes y rigen de sus maravillas." (Imagination (Fantasy abandoned by reason produces impossible monsters: united with her, she is the mother of the arts and the origin of their marvels.)*

– Francisco de Goya

In an old and cavernous wooden warehouse space built in the early twentieth century, gently lapped by waves on a pier over the harbor (the last original wharf structure remaining in Sydney, Australia), Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller premiered *The Murder of Crows* in June 2008. This 98 speaker, 30-minute-long sound and mixed-media installation explores trauma – both collective and personal – through a sequence of filmic and narrative fragments tied together by recorded music, song, voices and other sounds. The title of the installation alludes to the traditional expression indicating a flock of crows and their unusual ability to mourn: in a “crow funeral”, many crows gather together upon the death of one of them and caw a lament for the dead, sometimes for periods of more than twenty-four hours. The ability (or inability) to mourn and to elaborate loss – both on a personal level and a collective one – is indeed one of the main undeclared topics investigated through this monumental artwork poised between the dreams and catastrophes of the twentieth century, and the deferred promises of globalization – itself unexpectedly catastrophic in many ways, like a series of bad dreams.

Since the early 1990s, Cardiff and Bures Miller’s experimental art has been a fascinating exploration of how sound affects and shapes our experience. It has shifted our attention away from art as a primarily visual experience and an experience of the here and now (art as a specific object), to art as a multi-sensorial experience where sound sculpts space, and memory and reverie play an essential role: we are paradoxically transported away from the here and now, in order to achieve a heightened awareness of our bodies and being in the here and now. They create poetic, ambiguous, and fractured narratives that investigate desire, intimacy, love, loss, and memory, making reference in their works to the world of film, theater, and spectacle, as well as to the ways in which technology affects our consciousness. The work is about the mutually connected forms of disembodiment and re-embodiment, as well as a celebration of all the apparently non-productive aspects of human

life, such as the dimension of the hysterical and madness.

*The Murder of Crows* continues their explorations into the experience of the sculptural and physical qualities of sound. The artists used a stereophonic recording and playback system that channels the sounds through the speakers to create an “ambisonic” surround sound system that enhances spatial sound perception, physically enveloping the listener in a moving field of sound and music. Although run by an impressive number of amplifiers positioned together in a corner of the space and synched by a computer, the work does not celebrate technology, but rather uses it discretely to create an emotionally-charged environment and experience.

Compared to earlier mixed-media installations such as *Dark Pool* (1995), *Paradise Institute* (2001), *Opera for Small Room* (2005), and *The Killing Machine* (2007), the vast and bare space in Sydney became the setting for one of Cardiff and Bures Miller’s most minimal installations to date, from the point of view of materials presented within the soundscape. *The Murder of Crows* is the third installation by Janet Cardiff, and the first as a collaboration by the duo Cardiff and Bures Miller, to spatially and visually adopt the use of speakers on stands to create a soundscape where the artworks seems to “walk” around the listener just as much as the listener creates his or her own paths through it. It was indeed preceded by *Whispering Room* (1991) where 16 looped audiotracks, each of different duration (from 40 seconds to 3 minutes), were played back on small bare speakers in an installation that also combines the projection of a short film fragment. While in there is only one female voice half-sleepily telling of her dreams in *The Murder of Crows* in the middle of the room, the female voice of the *Whispering Room* is heard from all the speakers of the installation, describing fragments of events. “The story is unravelled by the way the listener moves from speaker to speaker through the space” (Cardiff). The second work to structurally precede *The Murder of Crows* is *The the Forty- Part Motet* (, 2001) conceived by Cardiff and edited by Bures Miller as a reworking of a motet (“*Spem in Alium Nunquam Habui*,” 1573) composed by Thomas Tallis in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Forty separate singers’ voices were pre-recorded and played back by different speakers positioned on stands in an oval so as to heighten the spatial and sculptural aspect of sound. Again the visitor could choose their own path through the physical yet virtual space of the sound work, with waves of emotion rising and receding whether near a single voice coming from a speaker or the choir of voices rushing off in another part of the work.

With almost one hundred black audio speakers simply placed on stands, on wooden chairs, attached to pillars or near the ceiling, *The Murder of Crows* is close indeed to the minimal

visual interventions and bare essentiality of *Forty- Part Motet*. And yet the size of the area needed to present the installation, and the complex layering of different found and composed music, combined with the presence of pre-recorded narrative fragments suggest that *The Murder of Crows* may ultimately be closer in many ways to Cardiff's renowned audio or audio-video walks than to the abstract sound sculpture *Forty- Part Motet*. It is made up of described images, song, and fragments of narrated dreams that evoke outrage, fear, suffering, love, loss, the impulse to revolt, and our ability to remember and to forget simultaneously through references to war, patriotism, subjugation, violence. The piece morphs in a dreamlike way from military marches to a lullaby. Both a symphonic and intimate work, it is about the personal psyche and our ability to elaborate and process trauma through dreaming and the imaginary. Furthermore, while in *Forty- Part Motet*, one is "inside" the space of the singers, that is, inside their performance, in *The Murder of Crows* the viewer/ listener's space shifts constantly from being part of the cinematic or theatrical space to being a spectator sitting on a chair in front of it – both within and in front of the performance, in Brechtian terms. The shift is from spectatorship to participation, in and out.

*The Murder of Crows* is structured sequentially by the alternation between song and spoken voice, and these elements are woven together by ambient sounds of an interior world – water dripping, footsteps, the noise of tools and machines – and of an outdoor landscape – crows, wind, a large wave that rushes over the space several times during the piece, and seagulls. There are also moments of silence and transition, as well as three main songs in this work, and in between song and music, three dreams are told by Janet's solitary and dreamy voice which periodically emerges from the lone horn on the table. The first dream describes a horrific sci-fi scene of an auditorium which is transformed into a factory that grinds up cats and babies with blood everywhere, like in a drug-induced nightmare. This is followed by sounds and noises of men at work and then by Janet's second dream – a scene of tremendous human subjugation and physical and mental torture ("...we pass by a bunch of people walking, all chained up. [...] Then somehow we were in the army commander's headquarters, or something. I think he was the leader of the area, and some guy comes in; he was hanging on to one of the kids who was in the line-up. And he brings him in, sort of dragging him, saying, 'He decided he'd run for it, but I caught him.' And you could see that one of the kid's feet, his foot was all swollen up. His toes were all big and purple; he's crying and looking at us saying, 'Please help me, please help me.' And the leader goes, 'O.K., you know what to do with runners. You can't run with only one leg. Take him and cut off his leg. Take him and cut off that bad foot.' The kid starts screaming and the guy was dragging him away...").

This is followed by an opposite sense of the military as a triumphant and heroic collective

force through the appropriation of Russian composer Aleksxander Aleksxandrov's "Svyaschennaya Voyna" (*The Sacred War*), one of the most famous songs associated with World War II, a patriotic military march with cymbals and trombones composed in 1941 when Hitler invaded the Soviet Union.

Almost as if one were in a strange concert hall rather than in an art installation, a surge of the sound of marching overtakes the space, with an Army singing "Vstavaj, strana ogromnaja / Vstavaj na smertnyj boj! / S fašistskoj siloj tjomnoju, / S prokljatoju ordoj," (Rise up, huge country / Rise up for a mortal fight! / With the dark fascist force / With the damn horde.). The Russian song interestingly includes images that recur throughout *The Murder of Crows*, such as the reference to a mass of people singing in defence of freedom: "Pust' jarost' blagorodnaja / Vskipaet, kak volna! / Idjot vojna narodnaja, / Svjaščennaja vojna!" (Let noble fury / Boil up like a wave / A people's war is going on / A sacred war!), and to the black wings of crows: "Ne smejut kryl'ja čornye / Nad Rodinoj letat'" (Black wings don't dare / To fly over the homeland). The contrast between nostalgia for the heroic sense of the twentieth century and the horror and disgust engendered by the bodily dissection suggested in the preceding dream cause confusion, ambivalence, and a lack of understanding – the contradictory emotions and inexplicable shifts that dreams are made of.

The cawing of crows and seagulls, the sounds of wind, ocean waves, and heavy breathing follow follow to introduce the atmosphere of Janet's third dream which begins in a comforting way and then turns sour. In this dream, she describes a small house on a beach which she recognizes as her own. She enters it only to find the shocking presence of a severed leg on a bed ("On the bed there's a leg sticking out from under the covers. So I go over to the bed and slowly pull back the sheet to see who's sleeping there. But I jump back because it's just a leg ... there's no body ... with a running shoe and a sock on it. I try to scream and I want to wake up but I can't scream and I can't move.") This is followed by the second song, an operatic surreal piece about a lost leg that is sung by a soprano and a chorus ("Where is my leg, where has it gone?" - Chorus "She's lost her leg, where has it gone?" "She needs her leg, bring back her leg." "It was blown off by a bomb.") The horrific contrast between the tone of this song and its words ends and is followed by guitar music and a soothing and comforting lullaby sung by Janet. Coming from the gramophone horn on the table in the center of the installation, she sings: "Crows did fly / Through the sky / I hear their cries / Strange lullaby / Close your eyes and try to sleep / They wait for me in the middle of the night / It's hard to believe it now / But I know it's going to work out right / Dreams will come / And when they're done / It won't be long / Until the dawn ...".)

The work was strongly inspired by Goya's *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* – an etching from the series called "*Los Caprichos*" (c.1799) – portraying a sleeping figure whose

head and arms rest on a table surrounded by winged monsters and ghouls. These “*Caprichos*” prints were made to convey the artist's disillusionment with human weaknesses, and his rancour at the Spanish aristocracy, the clergy, and more generally human nature itself.

Out of the gramophone horn on the table in *The Murder of Crows* comes Janet's own voice reciting dreams and thoughts as if, like Goya's sleeper, she is absorbed in her own nightmares. Using multiple soundscapes, as well as compositions by Freida Abtan, Tilman Ritter, Titus Maderlechner, and Bures Miller (who wrote the lullaby Cardiff sings), the artists create a “sound play” that physically envelops the listener in a moving field of sound and music. The piece is a requiem to a world of positivity and utopia that – although heralded at the end of the Cold War after 1989 – seems to have disappeared in our time of pathological “war on terror” and “ethnocidal” violence that mark the darker sides of globalization.

Although conceived earlier, Cardiff and Bures Miller composed most of *The Murder of Crows* during their stay in Katmandu, Nepal, where they spent over a year in six months between 2007-2008 waiting for their adoptive daughter to be released from an orphanage. Their days were spent between a hotel room near the orphanage and their visits to their small daughter, waiting and negotiating an experience of being in and out of her life. Experimenting the relationship between inside and outside, intimacy and public action/community is also at the heart of this new installation. It was during this period that they began to create a series of small *Telephone Pieces*, where the listener picks up the phone and hears Janet's recorded voice as she describes her dreams. These recorded works are experienced by the audience as the intrusion of a distant, personal world into the daily life where they are experienced, as a form of respite from the confusion of public space where attention and focus wane in a plethora of fleeting simultaneous stimuli. This attention to the simultaneity of possible experiences in the world today, and in particular to the pain and anger caused by the mediated knowledge (through television and the Internet) that one can have of wealthy lifestyles (that are impossible to achieve in poorer and post-colonial locations where they are, however, viewed through those media), lies at the basis of Cardiff and Bures Miller's recent investigation of traumapractice, in particular since their installation *The Killing Machine* (2007) that immediately preceded *The Murder of Crows*.

*The Killing Machine* may indeed be read as referring to the horrors of torture and war and repression in contemporary culture after 9/11. Fear has engendered violence and repression, and states of exception (where civil liberties are suspended on the basis of an exceptional situation) proliferate. Certainly, in both *The Killing Machine* and *The Murder of Crows*, bodies appear dispensable, and, indeed, almost the entire entertainment industry

seems poised to make us believe that bodies *are* dispensable. Death is a daily affair, and not of a great importance. It never happens to us.

The contemporary world is characterized by various disjunctive flows – the flows of mass migrations and diaspora, on the one hand, and the flows of electronic mediation, on the other. The period after 1989 was supposed to be an era of progress, endorsed by open markets, free flow of financial capital, expansion of democracy and human rights. Instead it has been marked by a proliferation of ethnic cleansing and political violence against civilian populations from Eastern Europe, Rwanda, and India to the World Trade Center attacks, Abu Graib, and Gaza. This dual condition has produced contexts where nationalisms reappear as “majoritarianism,” characterized by a “fear of small numbers” as Arjun Appadurai has acutely described in his most recent book. “Majoritarianism” engenders and is mutually engendered by a converse minority-driven terror. A radical uncertainty about key social identities in today’s world results in extreme violence while borders are obscure and contested and a sense of secure locations for daily life vanishes. The body and the bodies of society appear disarticulated and uncertain to the degree that a suggestion of a collective phantom limb syndrome may appear to best characterize contemporary subjectivity. Not by chance, the third dream in *The Murder of Crows* revolves around the shock of recognition of a leg still wearing a running shoe but detached from its absent body, discovered under a blanket in a bed. Rather than feeling the pain of a limb that has been cut off from our body, Janet’s dream reverses the effect, so that it becomes the pain of finding an amputated limb that has lost its body – a periphery with no center by which to articulate itself. And yet the entire experience of *The Murder of Crows* is geared towards this spatial geography, towards the elaboration of a possible geography on the level of the imaginary and, by implication, within the stage of the installation.

The spatial and structural layout of the installation is based, in fact, on the relationship between an “outside” space (of military marches, the squawking of birds, and, at times, of ncrowds of people), and an intimate “inside space,” spatially defined by the cluster of chairs at the center, which is only reached after a long forward movement through the outside space, a walk towards the constellation of chairs and speakers at the center only, apparently positioned in a random cluster. This “center” core or interior space is characterized by the presence of a density of chairs, some with speakers and others empty for the audience to sit on. Here each the viewer/listener becomes an active part of the scene, taking the place of the speakers on one of the chairs, and especially so by sitting on one near thean old trombone horn speaker lying on an old card table. From this core, other chairs and speakers on stands radiate outwards in irregular patterns, so as to create a permeable, uncertain border between the inside and the outside. Coming from speakers placed in tThis more

external space, around the core, is where you hear the military march of 1941 as well as the sounds cawing of crows or seagulls flying that seem to be swirling around the central space. The central, interior space is where you sit and listen to Janet's voice recounting a series of three dreams at three different moments during the piece. At times, the horn is quiet, and the listeners' attention goes to observing the noises, music and sound from the "outside space" as it encroaches or transforms the experience within. Several times during the piece the sound of a large wave traverses this circular soundscape longitudinally, as if able to wash over the boundary between inside and out, the way overwhelming emotion is able at times to break down the order we impose on our negotiations with the outside. It washes it all away, at least momentarily.

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev,  
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