Inexplicable Symbiosis: A Converstion with Janet Cardiff
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The first mid-career comprehensive survey of the work of Canadian artist Janet Cardiff Exhibitions; Installations and Process, took place October 14, 2001, January 20, 2002 at P. S. 1. Curated by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, the show brings together Cardiff's major installations: The Dark Pool (1996), To Touch (1993), Playhouse, (1997), The Muriel Lake Incident (1999), and Forty-Part Motet (2001). Each installation was housed in a chamber off a long corridor. At one end, a documentation room was created with carrels for visitors to peruse illustrated catalogues or to listen to the corresponding audio and video Walks. An onsite Walk was also created especially for PS1. In each Walk, visitors, listening through headphones of a CD Walkman or looking through the viewfinder of a camcorder, follow the artistís binaurally recorded directions, while becoming involved in the story embedded in Cardiffís telling. Voices, footsteps, music, the sounds of cars and gunshots, all make up the octagonal soundtrack of an actual walk through real indoor or outdoor spaces. Cardiff's works take the conventions of cinema, sculpture, installations and science-fiction as a starting-point to explore the complexity of subjectivity in todays highly technological world. Cardiff was born in Brussels, Ontario in 1957, lives and works in Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada and currently, in Berlin. She and her husband and partner, George Bures Miller represented Canada at the 2001 Venice Biennale, with their 17-seat pseudo-cinema installation, The Paradise Institute.

CT: The Dark Pool, was originally presented in Canada in 1995 The installation, looks like some abandoned junk shop or attic, is filled with a cacophony of furniture, carpets, books, empty dishes, and mechanical paraphernalia. What was your inspiration ?

JC: This was George and my first major collaboration. Our studio looked quite messy, very much like this and because we were pretty sick of the aesthetic of clean minimal art happening in Canada at that time, it seemed right to move in this direction. Perhaps the work also evolved as a side-product of starting to use the Internet and thinking in hypertext. In the piece there are scientific textbooks that relate to different time periods, encyclopedias from 1930's containing information that is no longer true, fiction books, wacky objects, personal stories and other things. We were imagining The Dark Pool, a metaphor for the brain, as a place you go into that clicks on memories from different places - like in Borges' looping stories and magical places. It's also as if two scientists were working here and one day they closed the door and left. Yes, it's about George and myself and all the inexplicable activity that goes on in science and art and in relationships. Making art is totally inexplicable. In the same way the pool of water in The Dark Pool, defies all scientific laws: if you stick your hand in, it will disappear. A feather doesn't float on it - and then one day, the pool itself disappears.

CT: Is there sound in the piece?

JC: It's triggered by your shadow. As you walk around, different sounds are coming from these funny 1950's horns, or from this paper cup attached by a string to a hidden speaker. There is a look of old antiques here but there are also modern speakers that permit different timeframes to enter the dialogue.

CT: This also seems like the backstage of a theater or behind the curtain of our vision - inside the brain - filled with secrets, tricks, memories. Perhaps itís also a reaction to computer technology.

JC: It's definitely a comment on technology and obsolescence. There are pieces of old technical equipment under the tables, old radios, for one. Here is a map of the world drawn by Andrea Bianca in 1436 and there, books on physiognomy. We're still producing all this

stuff - these outdated ideologies - we just don’t realize it.

CT: It’s a diaristic strategy, one that may also evolve over time--like a work in progress. But it is different from your other works.

JC: This is the first major piece on which we collaborated, where we learned to work together. George likes to build things and I like to conceptualize more, normally. But In The Dark Pool, it’s hard to tell who did what - we both were very involved in everything. Here is a line of poetry that I pieced together from words cut out of books that came originally from a note George left me one day. It says, „I love you like a straitjacket.“

The Dark Pool came at a time before George and I started to show internationally, when we had a bit more time than we do now, and it has evolved over its first two exhibitions. First, there were just a few tables, and then it grew into a room. It was pretty much in this state when shown in New York a few years ago. For this show we just upgraded the technology; it used to be on cassette tapes and now it’s on CD players.

CT: This work reminds me of Kienholzís tableaux, without characters. Here we become „players“; in a Kienholz, we are voyeurs.

JC: That’s a good reference. George once loved Kienholzís work the way he envelopes you in his weird environments. But my work was more about the cubist narrative of layering. For example, in 1992 I did Whispering Room, a cubist narrative piece that you could walk through. It had 16 bare speakers, and was similar, in that respect, to Forty-Part Motet.

CT: How did your use of sound develop?

JC: All the work evolves naturally, partially from an interest in narrative and memory. Using sound effects as device is more fluid than writing stuff on the wall. Also, George was in art college in Toronto where he had access to technology, sound, computers, film and video. It was right after grad school (1983) when we did a couple of Super-8 films. One was quite complex and had actors. It was a 50-minute feature film which we cut and transferred to video.

CT: Forty-Part Motet skillfully combines the languages of music and sculpture with contemporary communications technology, profoundly altering our perception of the space. It is a 40-track audio installation that reworks of Spem in Alium Nunquam Habui (I Have Never Had Hope in Another), composed by Thomas Tallis in 1575.

JC: In all this work, the effect is to alter the prior sense of the space one inhabits so that the visitor becomes an active participant in a performance.

CT: In Forty-Part Motet the room is empty except for the speakers, and it functions between intimacy and free will. Although circumscribed, we’re not instructed by your narrative: we don’t need earphones and can determine our own path in our own time. Aside from this, the work spiritualizes the space. Particularly now, after the World Trade Center disaster, experiencing the work is extremely powerful. The sacred music was composed to be heard in a cathedral but here, instead of stained glass, you peer out into the mottled city to ponder its meaning, memory and pathos.

JC: Yes, you can see the city. You look out the windows, see the train passing, and the music makes it all so poignant. Its first venue was a mock-reconstructed chapel a religious setting. Many people thought it was ideal but I prefer it here because what I was interested in was the structure of the sound, the abstract nature of the composition and how it moves around the room. The composer was so brilliant working with space; he was like a conceptual sculptor moving the voices around and back and forth. A theory that I came across in my research

says that the music was possibly designed to be heard in a small church that had eight different alcoves and a choir placed in each alcove. This reinfiorced my idea of placing the speakers in an oval configuration.

CT: How did you come across the music?

JC: A singer I worked with in England recognized my interest in three-dimensional sound and said, You've got to hear this piece, it has forty different harmonies. I couldnít imagine such a thing. Then I heard it - and some of these old harmonies were modern and discordant, like Schoenberg.

CT: Who invited you to do this work?

JC: Theresa Berne, who produces artworks through her London based company, Field Art Projects, invited me to make an artwork for a festival .I told her about this piece and then she raised the funds for it. She organized the recording session, the hall, the singers, everything. (We worked with half professional singers and the Salisbury Choir, where the sopranos are children boys and girls.)

CT: Tell me more about the work's evolution.

JC: I had this idea; I didn't know if it would work. Theresa got the choir together and we recorded. By this time, we'd already spent a lot of money; it was an amazing recording session; we had a mobile recording unit with professional engineers, and all the 60 singers were wired with their own microphone and recorded onto different tracks. There were 4 conductors coordinating the singers. It wasn't until it was shown in Ottawa at the National Gallery that I finally heard it on forty speakers. At first it didn't work because there was cross-talk; the echo from the singers on the left could be heard on the right, and it didn't have the three dimensional effect I'd hoped for. I was feeling pretty depressed at that point thinking that it hadn't worked. Then George edited out the background noise from the tracks when they were not singing and voila! it became exactly as I'd envisioned. We spent $70,000 in equipment plus engineers, editing and such without even hearing it, a bit crazy, no?

CT: Speaking of old and newer forms of technology; in Motet, there's both contrast and conceptual symbiosis.

JC: Yes, it's now a virtual choir singing a 16th century work.

CT: When one does the same piece in different places, the architecture and mood are in play, and the work takes on a different character each time.

JC: It's true. This work has been installed in a castle keep, an old ruin, the cloister in Salisbury Cathedral, in a reconstructed chapel in Ottawa, a factory, and here at PS1. Each time it has different connotations.

CT: Can you describe how the space in the cloister of the Salisbury Cathedral determined the positioning?

JC: Yes. It was twice as wide as this hallway, about 3 meters, so we separated the speakers up one side and down the other and then it opened into an interior garden. It had a religiosity combined with an open airy casualness and because the voice disappears out of doors, there was a real acoustical problem. One of the ideas behind the piece is that it can be reconfigured in different ways, and thus, it changes in different spaces. The work will show all over the world - there are no language considerations.

The fidelity of the music however, is most important: playing from two 24-track hard drives

that have 24-bit sound a higher quality than CD. It's closer to the human voice. I tried to document it by taking my binaural head, my three-dimensional head, thinking there would be some way to document this experience. But it sounded like crap. Once you bring in only two speakers, it gets lost. It's finally about the reverberations and sound waves hitting you from many directions. (Binaural sound means recording what each ear hears separately with two small microphones in the ears of a dummy head.)

CT: Are they purchased or loaned?

JC: It is an edition of three, now in the collections of the MOMA, The National Gallery of Canada and the TATE Modern.This one on load as PS1.

CT: We've moved into the documentation room now. This room, configured like a library of carrels where the visitor sits, don headphones and peruses the documents of six different Site-specific Walks: Walk Munster (1997), Villa Medici Walk (Rome 1998), Drogan's Nightmare (Sao Paolo 1998), In Real Time (Pittsburgh, 1999), The Missing Voice (A Case Study B) (London, 1999), The Telephone Call (San Fransisco, 2001), and Louisiana Walk #14 (Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek, Denmark, 1996).

CT: When you're on these walks, one is quite aware of the authority of your directions.

JC: There's an entire subtext of how we react to authority voices instructing us - and how our body reacts to the intimacy of the other layered on top. And that you become partially a cyborg when walking.

CT: I don't understand the cyborg aspect.

JC: For me the CD becomes an extension of the walker. The term „Cyborg" is from a William Gibson novel, Neuromancer, in which he coind the term Cyberspace.

CT: The interpretation I understand for the „Cyborg" is that the physical body becomes mechanized, robot-like, but the mind is autonomous; retaining our unique memories, history, free will and individuality.

JC: No, my interpretation is that Cyborgs are part machine, part human; at least that's from reading cyber-punk novels.

CT: When I went through your walks, their controlling nature made me hesitant. The first time I participated in Münster in 1997, I was annoyed to have my path prescribed. But since then, I've become more compliant.

JC: In Europe the issue of manipulation doesn't get raised, but in North America it does, and part of it is that we're so aware of our own freedom here. Freedom is such a big thing in North America. In Canada we're accustomed to looking at society and analyzing and deconstructing the different systems that control us.

CT: In many European societies particularly in the Eastern European countries. There's a history of surveillance and phone taps. In the United States there are certain illusions of freedom by comparison , although since 9/11 we are more controlled.

JC: I have a really strong opinion about this. It's kind of superficial to see this form of direction as manipulation. Everything in our culture is about manipulation: we're given sidewalk signs that say, „Go there"; waiting at red lights; looking at a painting where the painter uses color to direct our eye; authority figures give us rules to behave in public places. Our behavior is always modified, and that was one of the subtexts of my walk pieces. It is a manipulation - but it's also like a child's game in that you have the freedom to give up your

power, it’s really bout that pleasure,.

CT: Miniaturization has played a large role in your theatrical scenarios: Muriel Lake Incident, Playhouse, and The Paradise Institute.

JC: Muriel Lake is a miniature, and there’s one also in the Dark Pool. George has an interest in this. In Muriel Lake, you look into the space and know you’re not in a theater, but somehow it plays into the fun aspect of it (same with Playhouse).

CT: It’s like a folk puppet theater using contemporary technology. Some of your works, are for a single viewer at a time - and often is more intimate than a puppet theater.

JC: The pieces George and I do are very much hybrids; they don’t necessarily come out of a visual-art background. They come out of references to theater and movies, radio pieces, performance work. We’re interested in making art that is accessible like entertainment. But also functions on many levels. In the art world I think there’s this unspoken rule that art shouldn’t be too entertaining or theatrical. But you must go with what interests you.

CT: The question of waiting in queues to see your work created much ado in Venice. At the press opening, there was a two-hour waiting line to enter your seventeen-seat Paradise Institute. Carolyn Cristov-Bakargiev, the curator for this P.S.1 exhibition said, „This is a curator’s problem. It’s not the artist’s responsibility to change the art curators have to alter institutions to deal with this kind of work to find a way to accommodate new art forms.“ I’m always impressed with curators who are such voiciferous advocates for the artist!

JC: I agree with Carolyn. From the position of the artist, I would rather not have openings at all. My pieces cannot be seen at openings, and I can’t change my work for an art-tourism crowd of thousands in Venice. A large museum in Europe (I won’t mention) had Muriel Lake on reserve and it was a popular piece. There were always line-ups to see it. They decided they couldn’t buy it because of the queues. But people wanted to have the experience and they stayed with it because they enjoyed the immersion. I totally disagree with the idea of always catering to art tourism some people just wonít see some of the work. I’d rather have quality than quantity. Every artist can’t produce art that has a five-second accessability.

CT: But time is a huge issue today.

JC: Yes, and those that experience our work get a lot of time back. How many artworks get an audience’s attention for 15-20 minutes? We know certain institutions won’t buy that kind of work because it’s difficult for them but it’s so limiting to think this way. Museums will just have to change.

CT: How does the artmarketing system function in Canada?

JC: George and I didn’t grow up in an art-school environment of a market system. There is practically no artmarket in Canada. The Canadian Council will give you money in different ways to produce works that are installation-based and perhaps won’t ever sell, this gives the artist a lot of freedom. I think it’s why you see so many media artists coming out of Canada, because our whole system is different. We aren’t as interested in making it into product because it hasn’t been necessary. Where in the U.S., there’s a lot more pressure to make art that is commodified because of money pressures In art school, having collectors coming and checking out young artists, and getting them into galleries right away. This simply doesn’t happen in Canada.