

Interview: Cardiff + Miller
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Published on Networked_Music_Review
September 20, 2007
www.transition.turbulence.org

Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller create multimedia pieces that combine aspects of sculpture, cinema, sound installation, and short-story fiction. Installations such as 'The Paradise Institute' (2001) use forced perspective and a three-dimensional sound track to create the illusion that one is sitting in a large theater. Their 'sound walks' and 'video walks' are immersive pieces that use common consumer technologies, such as iPods and video cameras, to create experiences that blur the line between experienced reality and narrative fiction. Their works are exhibited internationally and they currently have a solo exhibit 'The Killing Machine and other stories' that will arrive at the Miami Art Museum on Oct. 15, 2007.

Peter Traub: Welcome Janet and George. According to your collaborative CV, you have been working and exhibiting together since the mid-1990s. Could you tell us about your individual backgrounds and what brought you to become collaborative partners?

Janet Cardiff: We met in art school. George was a painter and I was a printmaker. On our first excursions or 'dates' we did things like filming and recording audio and playing around with it. I don't know why working together gave us the freedom to work in completely different ways than we did for our solo pieces.

George Bures Miller: Fassbinder had just died. We saw about 15 of his films in Edmonton that winter. We thought we could make a film like *The American Soldier*, shoot it in black and white, on Super8. We threw a script together, coerced our friends to act and help. It was a horrible failure but we learned a lot about working together and working with others. It cured me of the desire to be a filmmaker. We always helped each other on projects without concern for who's work it was. We were always discussing potential projects or pieces; throwing ideas back and forth. I think it was just natural that we should begin to collaborate. We often joke that the 1st major piece we co-authored was a result of us not being able to remember whose idea it was in the first place: 'The Dark Pool' (1995).

Peter: In arranging this interview, I was under an incorrect impression as to how you two work together on pieces and what role you both play in the collaborative process. This seems like a good opportunity for clarification. How does your collaborative process work? Taking a recent piece like 'The Killing Machine' (2007) as an example, could you discuss how you came up with the piece, what aesthetic tensions might have arisen in the collaborative process and how those were resolved. When you look at your collaborative pieces, are there aspects of them that you see as 'very Janet' or 'very George'? Are there particular visual, sculptural, or musical ideas that you individually tend to focus on and return to within your collaborations?

Janet: Lots of questions there. Do you remember how we came up with the idea George?

George: You were reading Kafka's "In the Penal Colony" and we started talking about it. Kafka's story seems so relevant to the strange times we're living through right now. I think we came up with the title and then started to brainstorm. What about this, what about that... how would this work, that's stupid, whatever.

Janet: I think we were also thinking about the prison research we did for 'Pandemonium' and how disgusted we have always been about capital punishment and the idea of democratic governments being involved in killing and torture.

George: And of course the Iraq war. But the process was that we both made drawings of

what we conceptualized and then we'd critique each others drawings and figure out what ideas were interesting which would then feed into more drawings. Originally we had drawings with solenoids attached to the arms of the barber chair. And one drawing had a juke box attached to the main structure that would control the movement with the choice of the music. But all that stuff changed when we started to build it and tried to figure out how to get it all to work. That's when the fun really starts.

Janet: Your question about aesthetic tensions; I don't really remember any. If we do have conflict in ideas or response to a piece then we agree to try it and see if it does work and then we go from there.

George: We can almost always agree on what makes a work stronger or weaker. Its funny because we almost never agree on what art we like by other people...

Janet: We tend to throw out ideas to each other, working on many levels at once skipping from the physical elements to the technical to the conceptual. For example in Killing Machine we set up the moving speaker first with the barber chair inside the metal structure. I recorded some dialogue voice for it then we played it through the speaker. Neither of us liked it even though that's what we both thought would work when we were discussing it. Then we played some other sounds and music through it and I liked some of it but G didn't. Playing it again the next day I agreed with him. Then G liked some music that we'd used in another piece and it did seem to push it into the right direction but I didn't want to use the same music again so in the next days G found a piece of music on the internet (Heartstrings by Freida Abtan) that seemed to suit the physical aspects of the piece. We both responded immediately to the music once we put it into the piece. It completely suited the mechanical nature of the piece but also the mood and pushed the piece almost into choreography ... a dance work. I guess the pink fun fur was more me and the mechanical robot aspect was more George but we both have to be enthusiastic for any element to stay in a piece and not be cut.

George: Hmm, I thought the idea for the robot arms was yours and the pink fun fur was mine.

Janet: yeah. You may be right.

George: One thing that maybe needs to be discussed is how we differentiate between our solo works and our collaborative works. The solo works grow out of a specific idea by one of us and even if the other helps with the project it still remains a solo work. Janet came up with the idea for the audio walks. She scripts them and though I work on them, really as a producer/editor, they remain her work. The same for '40 Part Motet'. She had the whole piece thought out before she even told me about it.

Janet: The video walks are a muddier ground because of the history of their development ... and recently we really just wanted to do one as a collaboration because we both had ideas for the script. (Ghost Machine at the Hebbel Theatre in Berlin.)

George: The biggest adjustment we had to make when we started collaborating was that we then had to really listen to the other's point of view. When I was working on my own pieces I always wanted to hear what Janet had to say; I trust her like no other critic, but in the end I could take her advice or leave it. In a collaboration it's a whole other level of discussion; more give and take. But for us its not about ego, who has the better idea or something, its about what makes the piece better.

Peter: Sound plays a very significant role in most of your pieces that I'm aware of (and of course, is at the forefront of the sound walks). Could you tell us a little about your musical backgrounds? Are there particular artists or musicians who you consider influential when thinking and working on the sonic components of your pieces?

George: I've played guitar and have written songs since I was a teenager... but I've never considered myself a musician. I also took some experimental music classes at college (OCA) as well as technical studies in the sound lab. Having access to the equipment was great in being able to develop sound ideas and my classes in electro-acoustic music, which was taught in fairly a heavy handed way (i.e. "this is art; this isn't"), gave me something to react against. Janet wasn't at school with me at that time but she would come in and help me record, even singing lead vocals on a song I produced at school.

Janet: In terms of music we're quite different. George turns on music when he gets up in the morning and I hardly ever listen to music...until it's martini time that is. I had the traditional piano lessons when I was a kid but never understood the beautiful complexity of the music... the mathematical connections between the notes and frequencies and chords. All of that I find pretty fascinating now and I dabble at piano now. My musical tastes really vary. As long as it's complex spatially and plays with pushing musical structure ... but then I still like to have harmony. I dislike most new classical music. It has become so predictable. I think the composers that are interesting are really pushing popular harmonic formats or styles and going crazy with it. But I've always loved great guitar and great voices ... Janice Joplin, Leonard Cohen, Jimi Hendrix, Edith Piaf, Janet Baker... Paul Robeson ... lots of different music. And if they create a narrative world ... that adds to it for me like Bowie's 'Space Oddity' ... great story. About sound artists and inspiration ... literature is more influential for me than any sound or visual artists and I think a big inspiration for me has been the sounds of the world. I've always been hyper audio aware. I think my sound world is just different than most people's. It's a really physical world to me, a spatial world.

George: I think contemporary dance has also been an influence on our work. Choreographers like Sascha Walz and Pina Bausch and groups like Montreal's Carbon 14 ... Rodney Graham loaned me an electric guitar when we were neighbors in Berlin which got me back into songwriting after a 15 year hiatus ... I love his piece The Phonokinetoscope. Literature; Philip K. Dick, Chandler, Conan Doyle, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Popular Science Magazines from the 50's. Encyclopedias from the turn of the century. Music, anything from 1968 or by Neil Young, Godspeed you black emperor, Set Fire to Flames, P.J. Harvey. Hmm, This is starting to sound like a high school yearbook.

Peter: A number of your pieces are very cinematic and you even describe them with cinematic references on your website – such as your reference to 'The Shining' in your description of 'The Secret Hotel' (2005). In 'Pianorama' (2005), the piano plays the soundtrack for an imagined film while speakers project your voices discussing the musical needs of particular scenes. 'Cabin Fever' (2004), besides being visually cinematic, also references 'The Godfather' in its soundtrack. Finally, in 'The Paradise Institute' (2001), you use illusion to create "a miniature replica of a grand old movie theatre." With this all in mind, how do movies and popular movie culture influence your work? Are there particular films, soundtracks, or directors that you consider influential for your own work? What is it about the cinematic experience that makes it such a strong thread throughout your pieces?

Janet: My favorite course in my undergrad was film studies so I think one thing that drew us together was a love of the magic of cinema ... the darkness of the theatre and the flickering of light creating these other worlds where you escape to. One film I saw in school was Chris Marker's 'La Jette' which inspired me completely. My favorite director is David Lynch.

George: The way he uses sound ... that scene in Mulholland Drive where the singer seems to be singing, then the microphone falls over but the sound keeps going. I think we try to play with creepy, strange, mysterious moods in similar ways. The sound in Eraserhead is also amazing. I've seen it 4 or 5 times, the 2nd time I walked out I thought it was so bad, the 3rd time I thought it was a work of genius, the 4th ... well I'm still not sure. In 1982 we saw Ridley Scott's "Blade Runner" in Edmonton. It was a bright sunny day when we went into the cinema and when we came out it was pitch black and it was raining. I think we've been in another dimension ever since.

Peter: How do you think about the role of technology in your pieces? Do you consider technology a supporting force to enable you to critically engage other ideas? Is technology ever in the foreground of your work such that a piece might use technology to comment on technology?

Janet: George's piece, 'Conversation/ Interrogation' (1992) is a prime example of that ... the shot, reverse shot style from TV is used as basis for a piece to give you a strange out of body experience.

George: I was working as a video editor and I wanted to make a piece that could physically illustrate to the viewer the fiction of the media. They sit in a chair in front of a TV and then I come on the screen looking off-screen right appearing to be talking to someone. Then the video cuts and they see themselves on the screen in the reverse shot looking off-screen left. The illusion of the edited conversation is very strong and we accept it as reality everyday, in every show we see on TV and at the movies, so its an incredibly weird feeling to see yourself in a room inside of a conversation you know has never taken place.

Janet: And the use of audio speakers to create virtual people is using technology to really comment on our relationship to it today. In 'Road Trip' (2004) the voices on the two speakers seem to control a slide show and talk about it. Very robotic but after a while you just accept that these voices are running the show. It also connects to The Forty Part Motet in how the music and speakers become very human and create an intimacy with the viewer.

George: But for the most part I think that we use technology as a tool and that it seldom is a focus of the work. It usually remains background; you know its there but its not something you have to think about. We also use it in a low-tech way. We always try to find the simplest solution to any problem. The video walks are like low budget virtual reality. They use a simple camcorder with headphones and yet they take you into a strange hypnotic space that can't be achieved with a computer and goggles. The Killing Machine in some way could be read as being about the evil of technology but for me it was never about that. In the end I think you realize the evil is very human; it is humans who have programmed the robots and it's a human who presses the button to start the machine.

Peter: Unlike paintings or recordings of musical performances, multimedia installations such as the ones you create are far more difficult to experience or even truly understand through the mediation of a web browser or video or audio recordings. Some of your pieces, such as the sound walks, or an installation like 'Cabin Fever' in which there are only two headphones available and thus only two viewers/listeners at any given time, seem to take a very considered approach to the notion of audience and the personal experiencing of a piece, even completely shutting out people not directly engaged with the piece. This is obviously a large and nebulous issue, but I'm curious how you approach ideas of audience and individual experience?

Janet: At first the small audience bothered me a lot but then some other people, like Mark Dion said to me when we were both in Sculpture Project Muenster (1997), that most artists get the audience for 3-10 seconds, people bicycle or walk by a piece and look and then go on. I may only get 25 % of the audience but those people do my work for 20 minutes so have a much more intense relationship with it. Intimacy and connection to the artist and to the unique experience of the listener is a really big part of some of our works.

George: Well something I like about art is its physicality, and how we as physical beings interact and experience it. You can't convince me that you can really experience a painting by looking at it on a computer screen. I guess you get an idea of what it's about but you can't really experience it. I don't even like non-glare glass between a painting and me but that's a whole other pet peeve of mine. To me what we are trying to do is create an experience that you can't achieve in any other way. And sometimes this means limiting the numbers of people or other drawbacks. Sometimes you can achieve what you want without any

drawbacks, which is great, but if all we wanted to do was reach the maximum number of people we could have tried to be filmmakers or pop musicians or something like that.

Peter: Lev Manovich uses your sound walks as a prime example of his concept of “augmented space.” It seems, though, that augmented space is present in various incarnations in a wide range of your pieces, from the binaural headphone soundtrack augmenting the film audio with audience sounds in “The Paradise Institute” (2001), to “The Forty-Part Motet” (2001) in which you take Thomas Tallis’s “Spem in Alium” and distribute each voice in the choir to a different speaker in an oval around a room. Intersections between real and ‘virtual’ or imagined spaces and narratives are present throughout your work and I’m wondering if you can discuss some of the challenges and issues involved with creating effective intersections and augmentations of space in your pieces.

Janet: You’re right. The fine line that separates our physical immediate world and creating an augmented or ‘third world’ we like to call it is really prominent in a lot of our works especially the walks. But in ways this augmented space has always been there with our imagination. I think the video walks really are the most extreme ‘fucking up’ of our physical space. They really screw with your head and we didn’t realize this until after we’d done one then we were able to really push and work with these effects.

George: I always hope that every work has that magical moment where the viewer questions what just happened or loses touch with themselves and/or reality. And in a funny way this usually makes them more aware afterwards. Someone once called Janet’s walks “MSG for the senses”. In The Paradise Institute you’re sitting in front of this large, detailed, hyper perspective model of a 300 seat cinema listening to binaural audio that was recorded in real 300 seat cinema and maybe for a split second you lose it and you believe you are in the balcony of a 300 seat cinema. The cell phone goes off next to you and at first you can’t believe that someone was so stupid to leave their phone on, then you realize that’s not a real cell phone but part of the piece. Those are the moments that matter to me.

Peter: While the sound walks indeed provide a new layer of information over the space the listener traverses, that layer is static. With GPS technologies it is now possible to create mobile content that is dynamic and varies depending on the listener’s location, etc. Are you currently looking at or considering using such technologies in future sound walks, and why or why not? Do you consider your current sound and video walks interactive pieces, and why or why not?

Janet: We aren’t really interested in working with GPS systems ... many people have suggested it and invited us to work with it ... In fact I bet we get more suggestions than most artists from people about what type of works we could do. Something about the pop art aspect of our work really involves people in thinking about new formats and they write us ideas all the time... and we tell them ... sure... do it yourself.

George: No thanks. I don’t want to use GPS or cell phones or any technology that will bog us down and keep us from thinking about ideas. I don’t want to have to wear 20 pounds of gear and wonder around suburbia looking for the spot that will take me to the next level. Interactivity sometimes seems to me like you’re too lazy to write a script. Ok, maybe I’m overreacting, but I went to a school where it couldn’t be good unless it was interactive....

In many ways we are traditional media, we are linear, things usually move from a to b, this is because we like to be in control, resistance is futile. The walks are interactive in the same way theater is, or films are, or even a painting is. Someone called the video walks physical cinema, which is perfect, because they involve you in a very cinematic way with your immediate environment. The power of the walks is the way that Janet puts them together, the timing, the script, the consideration for everything going on around you. You couldn’t get this type of experience if they were truly interactive works where the audience made choices.

Peter: I first encountered your work when I did your video walk, 'The Telephone Call' (2001) at the 010101: Art in Technological Times exhibit at SFMOMA in 2001. The experience was dreamlike, disconcerting, and haunting to use just a few adjectives. How do your video walks differ from your sound walks? Are the technical challenges different? Is your narrative approach different between video and sound walks, and if so, how?

George: What we found interesting about the video walks is how different they are from the audio walks. They effect people in entirely different ways. People talk about the sound walks enhancing things, making their vision seem brighter, sharper, the world bigger, sounds crisper. The video walks squish your world into a 2.5 " LCD screen. Vision overpowers the other senses, so much so that we sometimes would turn off the camera image so that the viewers could "hear" the soundtrack. But what is really strange and disorienting and ties into the augmented space idea is how watching this little screen and lining it up with the actual architecture where the images were shot, the viewer starts to confuse or merge the 2 realities. At a certain point you really believe in the reality of the image on the screen and can't figure out why the people who walk by in the shot are not outside of the frame in the space with you.

Janet: We actually found out later that it's a hypnotists' technique to make the subject focus near and far and that's what the video walks do constantly. You look at the screen then you look up to frame the shot correctly. People were coming out in these confused and disoriented states and talking about the works having a drug like effect.