

Janet Cardiff & George Bures Miller
Interview by Eva Scharrer
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I first met Janet and George in 2000, when I was editorial assistant on their first monograph, edited by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev on occasion of their big 2001 survey exhibition at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in New York.

This interview took place in the lobby of the Swissotel in Basel on June 14 during Art 36 Basel, where their installation Road Trip was shown at Art Unlimited.

ES Hi Janet, hi George! Let's perhaps start with the very beginning ... How did your collaboration start?

GBM That's a long time ago.

JC Yes, a long time ago, we were students together, and ...

GBM You invited me to work on a piece, right? And I guess we've been working together ever since. Our first date was making artwork.

JC Yeah. We used to go out and shoot some Super 8 films, and maybe record some sound and stuff like that. I was in printmaking and he was in painting, but our first collaborations were somehow always in film. He wrote a lot of poetry and songs, and sometimes I used some of his texts in my prints. And then we collaborated on a 50-minute film in Super 8. That was about 1985 or 1984.

GBM 1982.

JC I guess that's how we started, basically. But we both were doing our own things ... we never officially collaborated. Then he went to art school in Toronto and he was doing a digital comic book which I also helped a lot on, but it was his book. We worked on each other's pieces a lot.

GBM So with every piece basically we've ever made since we've known each other we've helped each other out ... in a way that just made sense at the time, but not as collaborators. At a certain point in our discussions about potential pieces we would lose track of whose idea it was in the first place and we realized that if we wanted to make these works that they would have to be collaborations.

ES So it was not necessarily through the use of sound that you started working together?

GBM Well in a certain way ... I was in school in Toronto and I had a sound class. I think I was making a music video or something, and then you [to Janet] saw how the sound room worked, and she was getting ideas from that and started adding soundtracks to her visuals. And eventually we realized that it made more sense to not just put sound to a print or painting, but to make installations that were sound pieces.

JC And this was in the mid-80s. So we started with adding sound, and then we added video.

GBM I think you were frustrated with the flat image, right? And you wanted to make something that gave you more of an emotional impact.

JC As well as when you use sound in a linear way, it involves a different type of memory. Conceptually, it interested me much more ... and how you can develop a narrative with sound as we were both interested in science fiction, film noir, French new wave cinema and all that sort of stuff. And somehow we wanted to transfer that into our artmaking, and time-based art seemed to just suit it more. George was doing a lot of kinetic sculpture with video, like TV sets, which were moving around and it looked like what was on the screen would be moving the TV. And I was doing just audio installations. And then we started combining it.

GBM Our first "real" collaboration was The Dark Pool that we made in 1995. As you walked through the space, sounds were triggered by your movements, and the space was filled with objects and kinetic sculptures. That was the first kind of a merging of our aesthetics--the first piece on which we collaborated, that took her sound interest and my sculptural sensibility and put it together.

ES You work with high-tech recorded binaural sound. I find it interesting how in your work, while it constantly tries to blur reality and fiction and conflates the relation between the two, at the same time the fact that it is recorded, and even the process itself, is somehow always present. You are completely driven away into a parallel world, but at the same time you are very aware of it. In the walks, you have to deal with a Discman and headphones, through which a--your--voice tells you where to go and engulfs you in a scattered narrative, while you walk around in a "real" setting. Often you even have a video recorder with a prerecorded image, which sort of doubles reality. For me, that almost has the effect of an aural-visual *mise en abyme*: an image within an image, a sound within a sound, a story within a story.

GBM Well, we're definitely interested in that kind of thing. Like in The Paradise Institute, when the cellphone rings, and the audience is not sure if it's a real cellphone or part of the audio track. We're fooling them on one level, but also making them aware of where they are on another.

JC In the audio walks, sometimes I use the concept of the main character (who is sort of with the viewer physically) listening to another tape-recorded character, perhaps from a voice-recorder speaker. So you have this recorded persona listening to another recorded persona. It's like a conceptual loop in some way.