

**Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller interviewed by Michael Juul Holm**

**Louisiana Contemporary: Janet Cardiff & George Bures Miller. Ed. Michael Juul Holm, and Mette Marcus. Exh. cat. Louisiana Museum of Modern Art. Humlebæk, 2006**

**MJH:** Showing at the Louisiana Museum, a Danish audience may connect to your work with a quite regional sensibility, since Denmark has a strong tradition of audio montage, in radio; mixing fact and fiction, different layers of sound and reality in radio programs ever since the sixties ...

**JC:** Actually the way we approach audio is also very similar to printmaking – I was trained as a printmaker and practiced it right up to the 90'ies. You can take different sources from all over, and then ~~you~~ collage them together. Conceptually I always found that interesting; you can take something recorded now and footage that was recorded 20 years ago, and you can seamlessly put them together in audio. Its like a mixture of time and space.

**MJH:** One important difference from the radio montage of course is the medium. Most often radio is experienced in your living room, doing the dishes or in the private sphere of your car. You are at ease on homely ground. But those cabinet constructions of yours that you look into, or the larger pieces that you actually move yourself into, place your body in, when you put the headphones on, they totally envelop you ...

**GBM:** We do like immersive media. We also try sometimes to overload the senses as well. Why do people enjoy going to Disney Land, or why do they enjoy rollercoasters?

**JC:** But that's escapism.

**GBM:** It's escapism to a certain degree. Is that so bad? I think our works function in a similar way to movies . Why do we like going to a film? Is it to get away from the real world? I like the suspension of disbelief that the audience grants the filmmaker as well... Its about taking you away from your thoughts somehow and activating the body. Using your whole body is something that we crave, perhaps ... But it is also about the escape from yourself. And that relates, I guess, to Buddhist ideas. Removal from the self.

**JC.**When you go into films, quite often if it is a good film, you're away from yourself for 90 minutes.

**MJH:** Like reading, reading novels ...

**JC:** Yes, like reading. It's the very same kind of space that you enter through reading that we are to find ...

**GBM:** We're also playing with that as well. In some ways we set the viewer up to expect one thing, say a certain convention of film and then we pull the rug out from under them or irritate them in some way.. Like in *The Paradise Institute*, where a woman (Janet) starts talking to you as if she's a viewer next to you bugging you, eating popcorn, making comments about the film and about whether she left her stove on at home or not. As a viewer you're wishing she would just shut up so you can watch the movie. Then a cell phone goes off next to you and for an instant you might really think – a lot of people do – that that's a real phone and a real person answering it. We like to confuse the viewer in a way that for at least a moment they are unsure of what is real and what is fiction. In that piece the actual film isn't as important as the whole cinematic experience is. It's like cubist cinema, the experience seen from many different angles. But we're fascinated with layers of reality, and I guess that comes back to painting, the mirror in the Dutch painting showing the artist...

**JC:** Yeah, that's an interesting connection. I never thought about that, though I've often thought about the whole rhetoric around linear perspective in the renaissance and how amazed everyone was at the 3-D illusion of linear perspective, and how everyone was amazed when photography was established – you know: This is like so *real* ... and people

thought you were actually taking a bit of the aura of their body every time you got photographed and stuff like that. Now it's reality TV and now this colossal confusion... we keep getting pushed into these different levels of understanding of reality, but it's basically the same rhetoric from 300 years ago.

**MJH:** Back to the eighteenth century in literature you have a construction like the unreliable narrator – you know, a figure telling you that this is a manuscript that was delivered to me anonymously, giving the full, true and amazing story of ... and then somehow, while reading, you realize this can not be true, that something is kind of wrong here – the tradition was taken up and discussed by Italo Calvino in the sixties.

**JC:** *Don Juan – Robinson Crusoe* ... That's a very good point.

**MJH:** You were trained in art school – but in many ways your particular way of working developed out of more than just the visual arts or contemporary art – it has its roots in literature but also in film, in futurist composers like Russolo, in electronic sound sculptures from the sixties like the ones Schönberg's son in law Luigi Nono did – he also used the architecture of the St. Marcus Church to place different parts of a choir in different niches, which is a low-tech version of what you do in some works. Personally I also recall a live recording by Lou Reed from '78, *Take no Prisoners*, which was recorded using the same binaural technique that you often imply. That record gave you the impression that you were not merely listening to a live recording, but that you were actually part of the audience ...

**JC:** Yeah, I think that there's a point there, because in some ways we're almost hybrid artists. The filmic or narrative is very important, and our work is also sometimes very theatrical. It crosses genres. We are part of the art world, we show in museums, but it definitely has its sources as much within literature and film. But I think the way we use binaural audio, the way it accentuates the senses, is much more about philosophical questions as in how you can really only know reality through your senses.

**MJH:** I'm happy to hear you say that, because it confronts this whole idea that there is nothing outside of language. That language lies before your perception ... When we talk to each other the transmission of pure language as signs is on a level of 16 bits per second, but what is coming into your body of sensual perception is on the level of millions of bits – so how can you ever translate this to that?

**JC:** Yeah, we still have our signifiers for our primitive sensual responses, so if you hear a scratch like here [pointing over the shoulder] it makes you turn your head instinctively – does that relate to when we originally lived in caves and if you heard a scratch behind you like that it could be a bear? I think that sound still relates to those primitive memories and understandings, and why we have these senses is for our protection: it is biological. Think of the analogy of how, if you're in a space capsule and you only know reality through sensors ... but what if the sensors are off? So it's all about our perception in relation to reality.

**GBM:** That's why we love the idea of short circuiting the senses. In *Paradise Institute* where you're looking into this very detailed hyperperspective model of a cinema, listening to binaural audio that was recorded in a real cinema, we are hoping at some point that you forget that you're not actually in a cinema. And when this person says something behind you like "Hey that's good nursing", you turn to see who it was.

**JC:** Or in *Road Trip*, the slide piece that we are showing... at one point we are fighting over the order of the slides ...

**GBM:** Our voices are coming over two speakers ...

**JC:** .. and we say on the audio track, well, why don't we just rewind it and re-order it? And everybody knows it's just a slide machine there being directed by two speakers, but they hear it going [making slides-clicks] and they see the slides on the screen going backwards so they believe that it's really rewound itself and somehow we have re-ordered the slides. It's very anthropomorphic. We're interested in this idea of how you can take the understanding of how media functions and screw with that-

**MJH:** What's on those slides?

**GBM:** It was slides that my grandfather took. I never met my grandfather but we found all of his slides of landscapes ... it's all about this trip across Canada to New York that he took. At first we were intrigued by the fantastic kind of visual nature, and also how the colours had faded and changed in some of the film – some of the stocks got incredibly red because the film was partly destroyed by exposure to light over the years. But it was not just the aesthetics, it was also the hidden story of why he made the trip...he was sick and going to see a doctor in New York.

**JC:** And then the idea came up of trying to track where he was when he took the pictures; we have done the trip across Canada enough to know most of the various locations ...

**GBM:** But we were of course creating a fictitious journey as well – we may call something Lake Superior while in fact maybe it was Lake Huron but we are kind of tracking this route that we *imagined* was the route he took. We know there are shots from New York, we know that there are shots from the mountains in Canada and we are also talking about *why* he was going to New York.

**JC:** The end shots are really great because he was on a boat ride, obviously around Staten Island shooting the Statue of Liberty ...

**GBM:** And then at one point you can tell that he changed the film on the boat, cause the stock is different, all of a sudden it's a much more blue, which is strange – placing yourself in that kind of a modal change in the past. It's like we're playing detectives.

**JC:** It's also very much about the nature of photography, what is it about photography that makes people want to take pictures – at one point, George brings up the fact that just before ~~when~~ his father left the family after his parents' divorce, that, knowing he was going to leave, he started taking all sorts of photographs of the kids. What is it about photography? Perhaps it's about really trying to hold onto something. Like, why did his grandfather take so many shots with no one in them– maybe he knew that he was dying.

**GBM:** Yeah, was it a preservation of this trip or a preservation of something else, something more? These are all fascinating questions about photography. Why do we take all these pictures as tourists. We have more photos now than ever because of the digital photography.

**JC:** But then also, this piece turned into a work about our collaboration and our relationship.

**GBM:** About how we work and how we discuss in a way.

**JC:** What happened was, we thought we would use these slides in a bigger installation, in a completely different installation, so I lined them all up and put them in the projector in the order that I thought, and then I set up two microphones, and we recorded our dialogue talking about them, thinking that we might use some of it ... and as we were going through it, it was kind of hard for me, because I was pressing 'play' on the remote and I was screwing up, so then George and I started fighting about it. He says "What are you doing, why are you going backwards" and all that, and it's all recorded. Then he starts: "Why is it in this order? This isn't the right order. When you go across Canada you go from here to there and ..." then me, "I don't know". This whole piece then – when we re-listened to it and replayed the slides in front of it, we realized we had a piece. But it was completely done as a sketch for another piece. We only planned to use a little bit of the audio, but now it's become much more of a piece about relationships as well as a piece about photography and all that.

**MJH:** There is an interesting connection to the *Berlin Files*, which also implies a slide projector?

**GBM:** We like the idea of how you have this ancient, ok this very old technology, of slide projections in the video piece, and I think it sort of inspired us then to do *Road Trip* that came after *The Berlin Files*.

**JC:** This idea that George could be on one speaker and I could be on another speaker and we could create this sort of virtual dialogue. That came out of the *Forty Part Motet* too – the choir where every speaker is one person, one voice, and that speaker becomes very

anthropomorphic. That's something that continues in all of our works, that sense of anthropomorphization of technology, and even with the little disc man and the headset you get connected to another person somehow, a virtual person. We used the same sense of escape and how sound can create physical presence in the *Night Canoeing*. It is a video projection done by George and I, we were out in the river at night in a canoe, and George was paddling while I recorded it with the video camera and binaural audio microphones, one in each ear, so that out of one speaker you hear paddling and George's voice and on the other you occasionally hear me. You don't know what's going on really because sometimes you just see the mist coming off the water and bits of the shore lit by our big flashlight. It looks a little sinister like a murder scene.

**MJH:** So you are in it together, and since some years now your works are all signed Cardiff and Miller?

**GBM:** Not the audio-walks though. I mean, we still do our individual work. Janet still does the walks in her name. We did one walk as a collaboration because I ended up being more involved with the ideas and scriptwriting.

**JC:** Yes, *The Ghost Machine* at Hebbel Theatre. It was a video walk though, which is different ...

**GBM:** But the audiowalks were all Janet's.

**MJH:** How did the collaboration begin?

**GBM:** We went to art school together.

**JC:** On our first date we started to collaborate ... We had a connection in our aesthetics right from the beginning. Even though we worked in different ways and also worked on separate work. I was doing printmaking and he was doing painting when we met but we were both really interested in film and audio.

**MJH:** Is there any specified labour division between the two of you?

**GBM:** In a lot of our earlier works we were always helping each other, so in my video pieces Janet would usually do the camera work.

**JC:** Or when I did the *To Touch* installation – a table that has electronic sensors in it and stuff like that – George figured out the technology for it. But when the walks started after 1996, it turned out that everybody seemed to want to have one. After the *Louisiana Walk*, the European art audience got to know about them from here, and they became much more popular, and I got so many invitations that I needed help. So ~~and~~ George began working as a producer and editor on the pieces. He always comes to the sites and he's very instrumental in planning the routes. For example when we came here first, we were here for three days. We walked around everywhere trying to find the perfect route for the piece and then once we found it we videotaped it. I wrote the script from this videotape and then we came back 6 months later to do the audio recording and the editing.

**GBM:** In a way it's confusing to the art world as well how we define what we consider a collaboration and what we define as our individual works. Basically, if the idea of the piece comes out of a discussion between us, then we consider that a collaboration. I think our first official collaboration – we worked on a lot of works together before that – was *The Dark Pool* in 1995, we couldn't remember who's idea it was in the first place.

**JC:** We made a collaborative film before that. A feature film shot on Super-8! But also we've been married for over 20 years, we've been together so long that – sometimes it's hard to tell who's idea it was. And as for the division of labour that seems to come instinctively.

**MJH:** How did the walks come up?

**JC:** I did the first audio walk in 1991. During a residency at the Banff Centre for the Arts in Alberta, Canada, and they had all the technology, like the binaural head and portable recording machines, all that sort of thing, so I was able to experiment and did the real simple audio walk that I edited very badly on a four track machine. It was through a happenstance that I found this technique. I was recording and then pushed rewind by

mistake and ended up listening to my voice on the same sight, and I went “This is really cool”. It has to do with how, when recorded media reinforces physical reality, it makes it into almost hyper reality. It gives your senses a kind of boost, a kind of a power boost drink.

**MJH:** The walks of course are site specific; you can’t do them anywhere else ...

**JC:** Yes, the walks are pre-recorded on the same site that you then later get led through. Even in sound we recognize space, and so if I were to record somewhere else and play it back here, people would realize that, oh, the sound of the water isn’t coming from the right place ... and that would bother them. But when it is being replicated or verified by the same environment it fits in so well that it becomes a new reality. Also it becomes a soundtrack for the physical reality, almost like physical cinema. The visual aspect of the world becomes the visuals for the soundtrack that you are listening to.

**GBM:** Maybe it’s got something to do with walking and the way we experience reality when we are in motion. And the way you use the voice, it all adds to this weird trancelike state that you end up in, it’s very much like reading a book.

**JC:** One of the first ideas when I was doing the walks, was this whole concept of walking; when you are walking, you have to pay attention. Here at Louisiana I take you through the George Trakas sculpture – and one physically has to be aware so that you don’t fall, so you can’t really listen too thoroughly to what you are hearing. Another sense takes over, the coordination sense takes over. And that’s something that I discovered with the walks, that there are parts where you just want the audience to listen and be aware of their physical environment. And that makes them remember any dialogue as if it were a dream. Also in a lot of the audio walks, I’ll describe the physical environment and something like, ‘There’s a man coming towards you with a ...’ – whatever. This can give the audience a sense of synchronicity when the physical world coordinates with the recording, like, how did she know he was there but it also helps enhance their vision and make everything brighter in ways. For some strange reason audio walks make you see more.

**MJH:** When you are in a walk or place people in the midst of a surround sound system, or looking into a cabinet going from one reality to another, let’s say, *nonreality*, what is your interest, what is it that you want to point out? For many years now whenever critics talk about works of that sort they seem to tell us that it is all about the same thing. It is all about demasking and deconstruction. But I get the feeling that your work is not about deconstruction but rather about constructing something, or pointing out something ...

**JC:** Well, I think, for me anyway, sometimes the investigations we do are just that ... investigations of our world. In the video walk we did together at the Hebbel Theatre, there’s one point, where the audience is walking along looking in the video camera, (the image itself is pre-recorded on the same site that the audio walks are), and we take them into a dressing room to look into the mirror, and on the camera screen they see *me* with the video camera, and then they look up and they see *themselves* in the mirror and it takes them out of the artwork completely into the virtual world of the mirror, totally screwing with their brains. I think it shows them how immersed they had been in the artwork and it is at that point I think when you get to these kind of surprise points or “aha” experiences; that’s where you an understanding of levels of reality that you can’t explain through words, and that’s the point I think we’re trying to get to. Deconstructing in order to immerse or something. If we really knew what we were doing we could just explain it in words and we wouldn’t have to make the pieces would we.