

Road Trip

Interview with Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller by Philipp Kaiser

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Philipp Kaiser: What is 'Road Trip' about?

Janet Cardiff: 'Road Trip' started because we found a carousel of slides in our basement that belonged to George's grandfather that he had taken almost 50 years ago.

Georges Bures Miller: First we were fascinated by how they had aged. Some of the films had gone completely red and some blue. They were quite beautiful images.

JC: One of the preliminary things we did for that piece was to set the slides up and to set up the audio recording device and then George and I talked about the images. So we were really looking at the slides and we weren't thinking of it as an art piece at all.

GBM: Originally we thought that it would be just part of a larger piece. When we watched it back after we have done the audio we realized that it didn't need anything else that the combination of us talking about what we were seeing was interesting enough. We ran through the slides a number of times and polished the situations we weren't happy with and developed it into a more fictional piece.

PHK: Did you have to restage your first impression?

JC: We didn't really restage...

GBM: I think we did a lot of restaging. (laughs) This is how we work together, we disagree and we don't remember these things.

'Road Trip' is my grandfather's trip in the 50s from Calgary - he even started further west because he was visiting his son in Vancouver - across Canada. If you were driving to the East you had to drive through America. There was no road through Canada over the Great Lakes. He drove through America and North Dakota, through Minnesota to Ontario where he visited my parents. The final part of the trip was when he gets to New York. He went there to see a doctor because he had cancer and this story all comes out slowly through our dialogue. I never knew my grandfather; he died before I was born but I had been told about him and his death. A lot of things come up in the first run through that Janet didn't know about it. We found it fascinating that he was taking these pictures on his trip. If he is dying why is he trying to capture these moments of reality?

PHK: When I first saw 'Road Trip' I was wondering who is talking to whom and what role the audience plays.

GBM: We thought of the audience as being voyeuristic. They see a glimpse into our lives that they wouldn't normally see. We're having a conversation by ourselves and they are watching us.

PHK: How autobiographical is this work for you?

GBM: It is a kind of family myth. We just found the slides and knew that my grandfather had to go the specialist. So we don't know if this really is his last trip but we told the story as if it was this trip. It is like us being a detective tracing his journey. People do that all the time with family albums and photos. It's a lot about discovering or placing yourself inside the pictures too. The idea where we start arguing about the route...I have done the drive across Canada and through the States about fifty times.

JC:I had taken the slides out and reordered them and thought it was the order of going across Canada but they weren't correct.

GBM: So to me it was really important that the slides were in the natural geographic order and made sense as a trip. So at one point in the audio we have a bit of a fight about that and we used this for the piece. It gave us the idea too to create the fiction of backing up the projector and simulating that we are reordering it.

JC: This man was really into photography. We found a newspaper clipping of him getting this Nikon camera from his boss for 50 years of service and that's probably the camera he used for these shots. But to me it wasn't the family thing that is interesting about the piece. It's not like us to do that kind of personal thing, even though the walks seem to be very personal. Most of the time the audio walks are very fictional. What became interesting was the idea of photography: All the shots he took were very artistic, they were about composing landscapes, and they really were about looking.

GBM: Did he have a sense of his death when he took these last images? We don't actually mention in the piece that he will die. We thought New York was an appropriate place to end.

PHK: You have been working together for more than 20 years. 'Road Trip' is so much about constructing a narrative that it seems to me that the topic of the artistic collaboration is crucial here.

JC: That was really one of the interesting things for me after hearing what we had recorded for the first time. It was a recreation of two people talking. It was a portrait of George and me, a collaborative relationship and the way our voices become these virtual artists controlling the slide projector was creepy in an interesting way. I think collaboration as such would be a too dry topic for us in general but it's definitely a subtext.

PHK: Is there any link to your recent work 'Pianorama', 2005?

GBM: 'Pianorama', 2005 was definitely an outgrowth from that piece. We wanted to do something that was again like sketching and not necessarily a finished work. 'Pianorama' was about our collaborative process but just going in a little different way. We pretend we are talking about the fabrication of a soundtrack for a fictional film that we are supposedly making.

JC: But this piece is very much about how people collaborate because even though it was a fictional film it is actually fiction that we are playing the piano too. We hired two composers who never met each other to pretend to be us. We set up two keyboards and then would describe a scene to them. So they had to respond to the suggested scene and at the same time to what the other person was playing. In 'Pianorama' there was more control than in 'Road Trip', most of the dialogue was scripted beforehand.

PHK: How do you usually work on a story and how does a story come together?

JC: Quite often it is serendipitous.

GBM: But it's also not. Very often we work in a much more sketchy way. In 'The Paradise Institute' we had the concept of a theatre and all these concrete details but then we shot like three films until we got the final version for the actual content of the piece.

JC: Our whole process is that we usually start by talking, brainstorming and writing and then with a narrative piece we shoot some stuff, respond and edit till we finally get something we like. The physical part goes much the same way. Trial and error.

GBM: 'Road Trip' is very slow. We wanted to do an interior piece that made people think a bit more. Sometimes you only see slides and we're not talking at all and when we are talking we're talking about the making of the piece.

PHK: It seems to be interesting to me that 'Road Trip' but also your work 'Opera for a small Room', 2004 first shown in Bregenz are about the reconstruction of a fictitious character. Lived lives are going to be fictionalized.

GBM: 'Opera for a small Room' is much more fictive. Basically we got inspired by a real person that collected opera records. He gave us the back-story but then we created a whole fiction around him.

JC: I think one thing that interests me is this character's situation of listening to European music in the middle of nowhere Canada and how it parallels our situation. We live in Berlin part time and also in the middle of nowhere, in the west of Canada. These are two cultures that are so different. Sometimes we say to each other a couple of days after being back in Berlin from Canada that we are in another, virtual world, like a holo deck. I think 'Paradise Institute' came out of that North American pop culture and European mesh, but 'Road Trip' is even more related to a Northern American experience because of the landscape images and the driving.

PHK: 'Road Trip' reminds me of Chris Marker's film 'La Jetée'. Do you care about these references?

JC: I never thought about 'La Jetée' but we love that film! It was a big inspiration for 'Paradise Institute', the man lying in the bed. He's wired up and not sure if the images on the screen are his dreams or not...that must have been a subconscious influence on 'Road Trip'. There is also a very nice piece by Rodney Graham that was quite influential for us.

GBM: He made a slide piece about Kurt Cobain called 'Aberdeen'. He shows slides while he is talking on a walkman and the slides are just going on and on not connected to what he's saying but of course related.

'Road Trip' was all about driving. There is a sense of this feeling of well being as soon as you are on the road because you have a destination in your mind and you are going somewhere, doing something. There is nothing more linear than a road and also than the slides. One step after another. The only time we break that up is when we seem to stop the carousel and rearrange the slides.

PHK: There is also a short passage where there is no image at all. It is completely dark, you are just talking to each other and one can hear the noise of the projector.

JC: The inspiration for 'Road Trip' also came from 'Berlin Files'. In the very beginning of 'Berlin Files' we are looking at slides and you have this flickering neon light and you can hear the sound of us walking around. We were interested in the physicality of the pretend slide projector but also the neon light tube. That shot gives you the illusion that George is turning on and off the light and I'm (my voice) controlling the slides. We really like the idea of the virtual control by virtual people and how technology can create magic like that is something that interests us. In 'Road Trip' there are some kinds of other realities taking place that maybe puzzles you in the first seconds, like when the slides go back and forth. You look to the projector and know that it is not possible that the voices are controlling it but there is this magical moment where you don't even think about it.

PHK: How much is the work about memory?

GBM: It is about family memory in a certain way. You're told a story about somebody, like a grandfather, and then you repeat it and then it is repeated to someone else.

JC: Photography has a lot to do with memory because it captures and takes away a place. And in a romantic sense it also captures the memory of the photographer and where they stood and looked. So you're also creating a portrait of this person through the photographs they took.