

As instructed by Cardiff — now back to her sober, how-to voice — you head out of the courtyard, toward the open spaces of the Mall and the Hirshhorn's sculpture garden. According to your ears, at least, a helicopter passes overhead, and Cardiff's voice, again in full melodrama mode, whispers: "I think they're tracking me," only to then downplay that idea as a figment of her own imagination, brought on by paranoia bred of her visit to Washington.

As Cardiff's voice leads you into the sculpture garden, among its Rodin bronzes, snippets of other talk enter your ears. You hear Cardiff in conversation about art with someone who your eyes tell you is not there. You catch a fragment of anecdote told by an older woman who says she's a fifth-generation Washingtonian. There's the sound of a museum guide giving a standard tour of nearby sculptures — also a fiction, or at least recorded sometime in the past.

Occasionally Cardiff speaks directly to you, telling you about what's going on in the alternate world she seems to be in. As you walk down a narrow path beside a reflecting pool, she tells you that she's "walking along a ledge 20 stories high," and then goes on to comment, cryptically, "Sometimes I'm not sure what's real, but they said that this might happen — a side effect." Or she launches into more generally meditative observations: The pipes and wiring under the Mall, she says, are like "the hidden layers of history in this city . . . the voices that are lost in the air."

This, more or less, is how things continue for the rest of the piece, as Cardiff leads her audience along the Mall, past the Smithsonian's vintage merry-go-round, into its "Castle" — with a meditative stop at the tomb of founder James Smithson — out again onto the Mall and then into and through the Freer Gallery of Art, and finally into that museum's elaborately decorated Peacock Room, painted by Whistler in the 1870s — at the same time, that is, as the river pictures that started Cardiff talking as we began our walk.

This partial description points to some of the obvious virtues, and failings, of Cardiff's work.

The basic premise of her novel art form is engaging. It's interesting to find yourself led by the ear, as it were, as an artist gets you to experience the world in a new way.

Cardiff's illusionistic sound effects can be captivating, too. Sometimes they lead to stunning coincidences that link the real world all around you and the sonic fictions she provides. As I was taking in Cardiff's latest art walk, a jogger happened to run by, followed by a family crossing my path, at precisely the moment that Cardiff narrated the passing of an imaginary jogger and family in her fantasy world, and just as her headphones fed me the sound of running shoes and stroller. Every time I've done one of Cardiff's walks — this must be the fourth different one I've come across, in places as varied as Muenster, Germany, and Oakville, Ontario — there's been some moment where reality and fiction intersect, or collide, or merge in interesting ways.

The best bits of Cardiff's new piece are the most straightforward: They happen when her businesslike voice tells us where to walk, and then lets her sound effects subtly comment on the real world all around us.

It is the audio equivalent of how great landscape painters choose an actual scene, and then give it suggestive tweaks so that it subtly changes meaning. That was the crisp mode that Cardiff used for her most famous piece, called "Forty Part Motet." She taped the 40 separate singers in a cathedral choir, both as they sang and as they chatted between takes, then played them back through 40 separate speakers pointing inward in a ring. By inviting us to wander freely in that circle, Cardiff let us become intimate with both singers and their song, and with how a bunch of quirky individuals, and their peculiar vocal parts, combine to form a whole. (Someone ought to bring this great work to Washington.)

The worst bits of "Words Drawn in Water" are those in which Cardiff puts on her storytelling voice and goes all poetical and pseudo-philosophical on us. At those points, the piece recalls an overwrought dream sequence from Hollywood. It doesn't really capture how the unconscious works, or even how a glimpse into an alternate reality might feel; it just regurgitates received ideas about how to construct way weird fantastic worlds.

Cardiff is surely onto something in her art. Over the next few decades, and with a few dozen more walks under her belt, she's likely to sort out what works best in her new medium, and where it tends to fail. Or, short of that, maybe a dozen other artists will take up where Cardiff chooses to leave off and realize the full potential of this novel form.

Janet Cardiff's "Words Drawn in Water," commissioned by the Hirshhorn, will be available free of charge Wednesday through Sunday 11 a.m.-3 p.m. through Oct. 30 at the museum, on the Mall at Seventh Street SW. Call 202-633-1000 or visit <http://www.hirshhorn.si.edu>.

WALKING AND TALKING:

Words: Lina Dzuverovic
Photo: Monika Rehberger

Canadian sound installation artist Janet Cardiff is at Art Basel Miami Beach to celebrate her brand new publication, *The Walk Book*, which, she enthuses, is truly "an art book, rather than just documentation of [my] work." We meet in the lobby of Miami's exquisite Raleigh Hotel, hours after a lavish launch party for the 350-page tome, which was commissioned and edited by Austrian foundation T-B A21. This isn't the chilly December weather Cardiff is used to back home in Berlin, so we wander to the garden out back and settle by the pool, away from the chattering breakfast banter coming from tables of familiar art fair faces.

Cardiff is excited, and for good reason. *The Walk Book*, a long overdue document of her audio and video walks, is a comprehensive representation of Cardiff's career over the past 15 years. As is typical of her work, the book has many layers. "It's got sound files and a pullout; it's got pictures that are just stuffed into it," she explains. An accompanying CD comes filled with snippets of sounds from different audio walks, and the first 20 minutes contain an actual tour of the book itself, with Cardiff serving as a guide to the visual references scattered throughout. The book's layout was "designed by Zitromat, a young duo from Berlin who have a beautiful, classical [sensitivity and who] do fun things with typography," Cardiff enthuses, explaining that she bought the bright blue jacket she's wearing so that she would match the cover.

The correlation between audio and visual is essential to Cardiff's work, although the visual often simply consists of the site itself. Working in partnership with her husband and long-term collaborator, George Bures Miller, Cardiff sets her walks in carefully chosen sites of special interest, such as London's historic East End, the Louisiana Museum in Humlebaek, Denmark, Pittsburgh's Carnegie Library, A Mall in Washington DC, New York's Central Park and P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center.

Cardiff first began to experiment with sound walks in 1991 after stumbling across a recording of her own voice on a portable tape player she had been using to take notes while walking through a graveyard. Hearing her voice accompanied by ambient noises and the sound of her footsteps instantly led her to relive her journey, discovering in the process a potential new direction of interest – a technique that would allow her to explore the relationship between memory, site and subjectivity. A cross between a guided tour and a fictional journey, each walk is an intimate one-on-one experience in which Cardiff takes the visitor (the walker) on an intimate voyage through a place and a moment in time. Her voice gently directs the walker, who wears a pair of headphones, through snippets of a narrative that is enveloped in a textured world of ambient sounds she has recorded at the same site. Cardiff often interweaves local history with fictional stories, placing the audience at the center of a film noir-like experience.

"[George and I] are both very interested in pieces that immerse the viewer, that make you forget where you are," she explains. "I think that's the attraction of film to us, that when you go in, you forget where you are. That's also the attraction to literature. Our work is very close to literature. When you read a story, you forget about the world around you. You're there in that book."

Cardiff and Miller's own stories are often laced with mystery and frequently employ binaural sound technique, in which sound is recorded spatially to create a disorienting hyperreality that makes the listener unsure which sounds are real and which ones are on the headphones. While that disorientation is an interesting effect to play with, Cardiff is most interested in the personal histories she encounters in her research. She still remembers the story that made it into her London walk, about "a man that stayed in his apartment for 20 years waiting for this woman to come back. It was a true story, and I used that and mixed it with some script from Daniel Defoe about the plague in that same area."

When asked about her collaborative process with Miller, Cardiff admits, "Ours is more complicated than most collaborations." Given that they regularly lend each other a helping hand on individual projects, the question of authorship is often blurry. "Whenever we do a project that comes from communal ideas, we call it a collaboration," she says. But the boundaries become almost invisible, especially in the case of the audio walks, which credit Cardiff only. "The audio walks would not be what they are if George wasn't editing them," she admits. "He wants them under my name because I write the scripts. But he edits the text. I do a lot of the scripts because I'm walking and talking, but he puts it all together."

Aside from the walks, the duo is well known for installations that play with notions of memory, perception and reality, using various methods to immerse the visitor. Works such as *The Muriel Lake Incident* (1999), currently showing in the Los Angeles MOCA exhibit, *Ecstasy: In and About Altered States*, and *The Paradise Institute* (2001), an award-winning piece originally created for the Venice Biennale, both play with cinematic space by fabricating makeshift cinemas around short film pieces, and by combining the film's soundtrack with pre-recorded binaural sounds of simulated audiences so as to confuse the distinction between fiction and reality.

The launch of *The Walk Book* is, unsurprisingly, only one of many activities on Cardiff and Miller's busy agenda. The pair also just opened a show at Austria's Kunsthau Bregenz, showing three newly commissioned installations, including *Opera for a Small Room*, which utilizes 24 antique loudspeakers and is inspired by a vast collection of opera records once owned by a man in British Columbia, and *Pianorama*, "a piano that plays itself with George and me directing it," in addition to several existing works.

When asked what's in store, Cardiff enthusiastically reports plans for more walks. "The city of Jena, a small city in Germany, is commemorating the battle of 200 years ago between the Prussians and Napoleon. And somehow they wanted to commemorate with an audio walk. Isn't that amazing?"

"Also there's a walk with Francesca von Habsburg" – an archduchess of Austria who is the force behind the T-B A21 Foundation and an avid art enthusiast. "She is renovating a monastery in Croatia, which is an interesting site because the sounds you can use are really fantastic," explains Cardiff. "We went there and videotaped the monastery right now, how it's totally falling apart, open skies and stuff, and then when it's been totally renovated you'll [be able to] walk through and see these holes in the wall and everything."

Walk, listen and learn. ■