

# INEXPLICABLE Symbiosis

## A Conversation with **Janet Cardiff**

by Carolee Thea

The first mid-career comprehensive survey of the work of Canadian artist Janet Cardiff took place last year at P.S.1. Curated by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, the show brought together Cardiff's major installations: *The Dark Pool* (1996), *To Touch* (1993), *Playhouse*, (1997), *The Muriel Lake Incident* (1999), and *Forty-Part Motet* (2001). Each installation was housed in a chamber off a long corridor. At one end, a documentation room was created with carrels for visitors to peruse illustrated catalogues or to listen to the corresponding audio and video *Walks*. An on-site *Walk* was also created especially for P.S.1. In each *Walk*, visitors, listening through headphones of a CD Walkman or looking through the viewfinder of a camcorder, follow the artist's recorded directions, while becoming involved in the story embedded in Cardiff's telling. Voices, footsteps, music, the sounds of cars and gunshots all make up the octagonal soundtrack of an actual walk through real indoor or outdoor spaces. Cardiff's works take the conventions of cinema, sculpture, installation, and science fiction as a starting-point to explore the complexity of subjectivity in today's highly technological world. Cardiff was born in Brussels, Ontario, in 1957; she lives and works in Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada, and in Berlin. She and her husband and partner, George Bures Miller, represented Canada at the 2001 Venice Biennale with their 17-seat pseudo-cinema installation, *The Paradise Institute*.

**Carolee Thea:** *The Dark Pool*, originally presented in Canada in 1995 is one of your earliest collaborations with George Bures Miller. The installation, looking like some abandoned junk shop or attic, is filled with a cacophony of furniture, carpets, books, empty dishes, and mechanical paraphernalia. What was your inspiration?

**Janet Cardiff:** Our studio looked quite messy, very much like this, and because we were pretty sick

**Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, *Forty-Part Motet: A Reworking of Spem in Alium* by Thomas Tallis, 1575, 2002.** 40-track audio installation, 13-minute loop.

of the aesthetic of clean minimal art happening in Canada at the time, it seemed right to move in this direction. Perhaps the work also evolved as a side-product of starting to use the Internet and thinking in hypertext. In the piece there are scientific textbooks that relate to different time periods, encyclopedias from the 1930s containing information that is no longer true, fiction books, wacky objects, personal stories, and other things. We were imagining *The Dark Pool*, a metaphor for the brain, as a place you go into that clicks on memories from different places—like in Borges's looping stories and magical places. It's also as if two scientists were working here and one day they closed the door and left. Yes,



Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, *The Dark Pool*, 1995. Mixed-media and audio installation. Work installed at P.S.1, New York.

it's about George and myself and all the inexplicable activity that goes on in science and art and in relationships. Making art is totally inexplicable. In the same way, the pool of water in *The Dark Pool*, defies all scientific laws: if you stick your hand in, it will disappear. A feather doesn't float on it—and then one day, the pool itself disappears.

**CT:** *Is there sound in the piece?*

**JC:** It's triggered by your shadow, but it doesn't really have to be triggered; it's just a way of having a little sound at once. As you walk around, different sounds come from these funny 1950s horns or from a paper cup attached by a string to a hidden speaker. There is a look of old antiques here, but there are also modern speakers that permit different time frames to enter the dialogue.

**CT:** *This also seems like the backstage area of a theater or behind the curtain of our vision—inside the brain—filled with secrets, tricks, memories. Perhaps it's also a reaction to computer technology.*

**JC:** It's definitely a comment on technology and obsolescence. There are pieces of old technical equipment under the tables, such as old radios. Here is a map of the world drawn by Andrea Bianca in 1436; and there, books on physiognomy. We're still producing all this stuff—these outdated ideologies—we just don't realize it.

**CT:** *It's a diaristic strategy, one that may also evolve over time—like a work in progress. But it is different from your other works.*

**JC:** This is the first major piece on which we collaborated, where we learned to work together. George likes to build things, and I like to conceptualize more. But in *The Dark Pool*, it's hard to tell who did what—we were both very involved in everything. Here is a line of poetry that I pieced together from words cut out of books that came originally from a note George left for me from a newspaper. It says, “I love you like

a straitjacket.” *The Dark Pool* came at a time before George and I started to show internationally, when we had a bit more time than we do now, *and* it has evolved over its first two exhibitions. First, there were just a few tables, and then it grew into a room. It was pretty much in this state when it was shown in New York a few years ago. For this show we just upgraded the technology; it used to be on cassette tapes, and now it's on CD players.

**CT:** *This work reminds me of Kienholz's tableaux, without characters. Here we become players; in a Kienholz, we are voyeurs.*

**JC:** That's a good reference. George once loved Kienholz's work—the way he envelops you in his weird environments. But my work was more about the Cubist narrative of layering. For example, in 1992 I did *Whispering Room*, a Cubist-style narrative piece that you could walk through. It had 16–20 bare speakers and was similar, in that respect, to *Forty-Part Motet*.

**CT:** *How did your use of sound develop?*

**JC:** All the work evolves naturally—partially from an interest in narrative and how to use memory. Using sound effects as a device is more fluid than writing stuff on the wall. Also, George was in art college in Toronto where he had access to technology, sound, computers, film, and video. It was right after grad school, 1983–84, when we did a couple of Super-8 films. One was quite complex and had actors. It was a 50-minute feature that we cut and transferred to video. Currently, it's stored.

**CT:** *Forty-Part Motet skillfully combines the languages of music and sculpture with contemporary communications technology, profoundly altering our perception of the space. It is a 40-track audio installation that reworks Spem in Alium Nunquam Habui (I Have Never Had Hope in Another), composed by Thomas Tallis in 1575.*

Janet Cardiff, *Playhouse*,  
1997. Mixed media, instal-  
lation view.



**JC:** In all this work, the effect is to alter the prior sense of the space one inhabits so that the visitor becomes an active participant in a performance.

**CT:** *In Forty-Part Motet the room is empty except for the speakers, and it functions between intimacy and free will. Although circumscribed, we're not dictated to by your narrative: we don't need earphones and can determine our own path in our own time. Aside from this, the work spiritualizes the space. Particularly now, after the World Trade Center disaster, experiencing the work is extremely powerful. The sacred music was composed to be heard in a cathedral, but here, instead of stained glass, you peer out into the mottled city to ponder its meaning, memory, and pathos.*

**JC:** You can see the city. You look out the windows, see the train passing, and the music makes it all so poignant. Its first venue was a mock-reconstructed chapel—a religious setting. Many people thought it was ideal—but I prefer it here because I was interested in the structure of the sound, the abstract nature of the composition, and how it moves around the room. The composer was so brilliant working with space; he was like a conceptual sculptor moving space around and back and forth. A theory that I came across in my research says that the music was possibly designed to be heard in a small church that had eight different alcoves and a choir placed in each alcove. I originally wanted to separate the speakers so viewers could hear the individual voices, and when I read about the alcove and the circle, I knew I was on the right track.

**CT:** *How did you come across the music?*

**JC:** A singer I worked with in England recognized my interest in three-dimensional sound and said, “You’ve got to hear this piece, it has 40 different harmonies.” I couldn’t imagine such a thing. Then I heard it—and some of the old harmonies are mod-

ern and discordant, like Schoenberg.

**CT:** *Who invited you to do this work?*

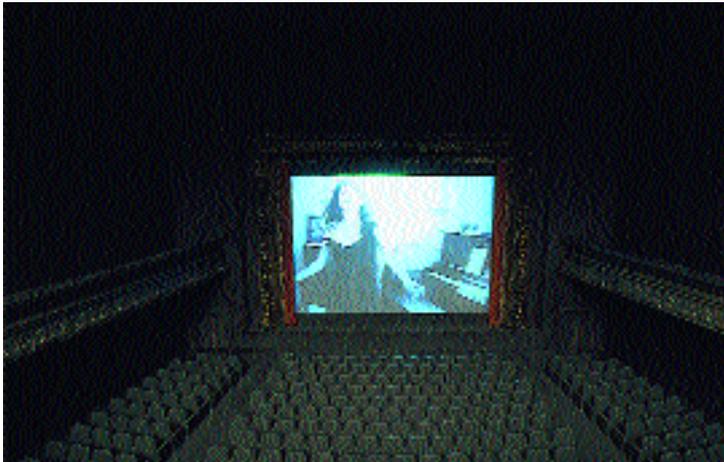
**JC:** Theresa Berne, an “art angel” who once worked in theater festivals—and now produces artworks through her London-based company, Field—invited and helped me to expedite my idea. She got a huge grant from the British Arts Council and three other sources while also arranging to have it tour England. She organized the recording session, the hall, the singers, everything. (We worked with half professional singers and the Salisbury Choir, where the sopranos are children—boys and girls.)

I had this idea; I didn’t know if it would work. Theresa got the choir together, and we recorded. By this time, we’d already spent a lot of money. It was an amazing recording session: we had a mobile recording unit with professional engineers, and all of the 60 singers were wired with their own microphones and recorded onto different tracks. There were four conductors coordinating the singers. It wasn’t until it was produced in Ottawa at the National Gallery that I finally heard it on 40 speakers. At first it didn’t work because there was cross-talk; the echo from the singers on the left could be heard on the right, and it didn’t have the three-dimensional effect I’d hoped for. I was feeling depressed at that point, thinking it hadn’t worked. Then George edited out the background noise from the tracks when they were not singing, and, voilà, it became exactly as I’d envisioned. We spent \$30,000 in equipment, plus engineers, editing, and such without even hearing it. A bit crazy, no?

**CT:** *Speaking of older and newer technology, in Motet, there’s both contrast and conceptual symbiosis.*

**JC:** Yes, it’s now a virtual choir. We don’t need the physical—we have replicas and virtual images.

**CT:** *Doing the same works in different places, architecture and mood are in play, and the work takes on a different character each time.*



This page: Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, *The Muriel Lake Incident*, 1999. Video projection, audio, and mixed media, installation view. Top to bottom: interior of viewing chamber, exterior, and detail of video. Opposite, top: Janet Cardiff, *Villa Medici Walk (Rome)*, 1998. Audio walk. Bottom: Janet Cardiff, *Wanas Walk (Sweden)*, 1998. Audio Walk.

**JC:** It's true. This work has been installed in a castle keep, an old ruin, the cloister in Salisbury Cathedral, in a reconstructed chapel in Ottawa, and in a factory. Each time it has different connotations.

**CT:** Can you describe how the space in the cloister of the Salisbury Cathedral determined the positioning?

**JC:** Yes. It was twice as wide as this hallway, so we separated the speakers—up one side and down the other—and then it opened into an interior garden. It had a religiosity combined with an “open air” casualness, and because the voice disappears out of doors, we had to alter the acoustics.

One of the ideas behind the piece is that it can be reconfigured in different ways, and thus, it changes in different spaces. There's no reverb added to the sound recording, which is abnormal for any CD that's produced. The work will show all over the world; there are no language considerations. People want it in Japan, Iceland, and Brazil. It's in an edition of three or five; and right now there are two, a North American and European one.

**CT:** Are they purchased or loaned?

**JC:** This one is on loan. The National Gallery bought one because it was so popular. It's the beauty of the music, but it's also a weird collaboration. The fidelity of the music is most important: playing from two 24-track hard drives that have 24-bit sound—a higher quality than CD. It's closer to the human voice. I tried to document it by taking my *binaural* head, my three-dimensional head, thinking there would be some way to document this experience. But it sounded like crap. Once you bring in only two speakers, it gets lost. It's finally about the reverberations and sound waves hitting you from many directions. (Binaural sound means recording what each ear hears separately.)

**CT:** On these walks, one is quite aware of the authority of your directions.

**JC:** There's an entire subtext of how we react to voices of authority instructing us—and how our body reacts to the intimacy of this other body layered on top. Also, you become a cyborg when walking.

**CT:** I don't understand the cyborg aspect.

**JC:** For me, the CD becomes an extension of the walker. “Cyborg” is from a William Gibson novel.

**CT:** The interpretation that I understand for “cyborg” is that the physical body becomes mechanized, robot-like, but the mind—that's a different thing.

**JC:** But that would be the walks, wouldn't it?

**CT:** Yes, but we still have our bodies, memories, history, free will, and individuality.

**JC:** No, no, my interpretation is that cyborgs are part machine, part human—at least that's it from reading cyber-punk novels.

**CT:** The controlling nature of the walks made me hesitant. The first time I participated in Münster in 1997, I was annoyed to have my path prescribed. But since then, I've become more compliant.

**JC:** In Europe the issue of manipulation doesn't get

raised, but in North America it does, and part of it is that we're so aware of our own freedom here. Freedom is such a big thing in North America. In Canada we're accustomed to looking at society and analyzing and deconstructing the different systems that control us.

**CT:** *In Europe, particularly in Eastern Europe, there's a history of surveillance mechanisms, phone taps, and so forth. In the U.S. there are certain illusions of freedom by comparison—although since 9/11 we are more controlled.*

**JC:** I have a really strong opinion about this. It's kind of superficial to see this form of direction as manipulation. Everything in our culture is about manipulation: we're given sidewalk signs that say, "Go there"; waiting at red lights; looking at a painting in which the painter uses color to direct our eye; authority figures give us rules for how to behave in public places. Our behavior is always modified, and that was one of the subtexts of my walk pieces. Yes—it is a manipulation—but it's also a child's game.

**CT:** *Miniaturization has played a large role in your theatrical scenarios, such as Muriel Lake Incident.*

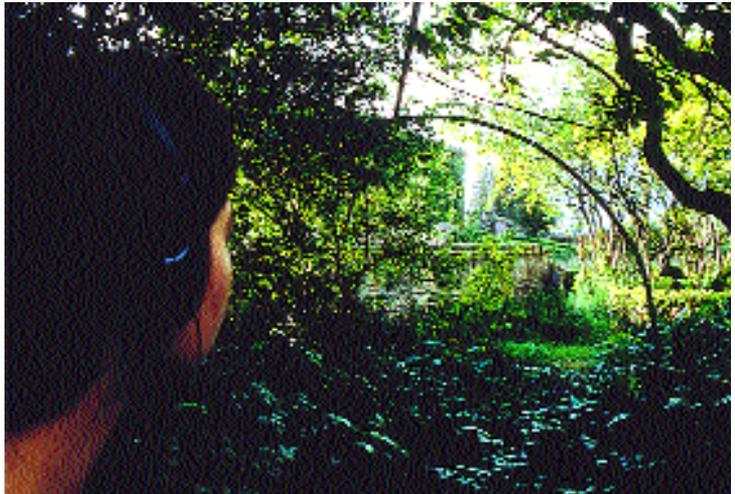
**JC:** *Muriel Lake* is a miniature, and there's also one in *The Dark Pool*. George has an interest in this. In *Muriel Lake*, you look into the space and know you're not in a theater, but somehow it plays into the fun aspect of it (same with *Playhouse*).

**CT:** *It's like a folk puppet theater using contemporary technology. Some of your works, however, are for a single viewer at a time—and are more intimate.*

**JC:** The pieces George and I do are very much hybrids; they don't necessarily come out of a visual art background. They come out of references to theater and movies, radio pieces, performance work. I'm not sure I believe that art should be accessible—like entertainment. In the art world there's this religious rule that art shouldn't be too entertaining or theatrical. But you must go with what interests you.

**CT:** *The question of waiting in queues to see your work created much ado in Venice. At the press opening, there was a two-hour waiting line. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, the curator for the P.S.1 exhibition said, "This is a curator's problem. It's not the artist's responsibility to change the art—curators have to alter institutions to deal with this kind of work—to find a way to accommodate new art forms."*

**JC:** From the position of the artist, I would rather not have openings at all. My pieces cannot be seen at openings, and I can't change my work for an art-tourism crowd of thousands in Venice. The Tate had *Muriel Lake* on reserve, and it was a popular piece. There were always line-ups to see it. They realized that they can't buy it because of the queues. But people want to have the experience, and they stayed with it for five minutes because they enjoyed the immersion. It's the kind of piece that's maybe better in a little collector's museum somewhere else. I totally disagree



with the idea of always catering to art tourism—some people just won't see some of the work. Every artist can't produce art that has a five-second open limit.

**CT:** *But time is a huge issue today.*

**JC:** Must we suffer from criticism because of line-ups, because certain institutions won't buy that kind of work? As Canadians, we didn't grow up in an art-school environment of a market system. There is practically no market in Canada for collectors. The Canadian Council will give you money in different ways to produce works that are installation-based and perhaps won't ever sell—this gives the artist a lot of freedom. I think it's why you see so many media artists coming out of Canada, because our whole system is different. We don't know how to make it into product. Whereas in the U.S., there's a lot of pressure to make art that is commodified. Having collectors coming into art schools, checking out young artists, and getting them into galleries right away simply doesn't happen in Canada.

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