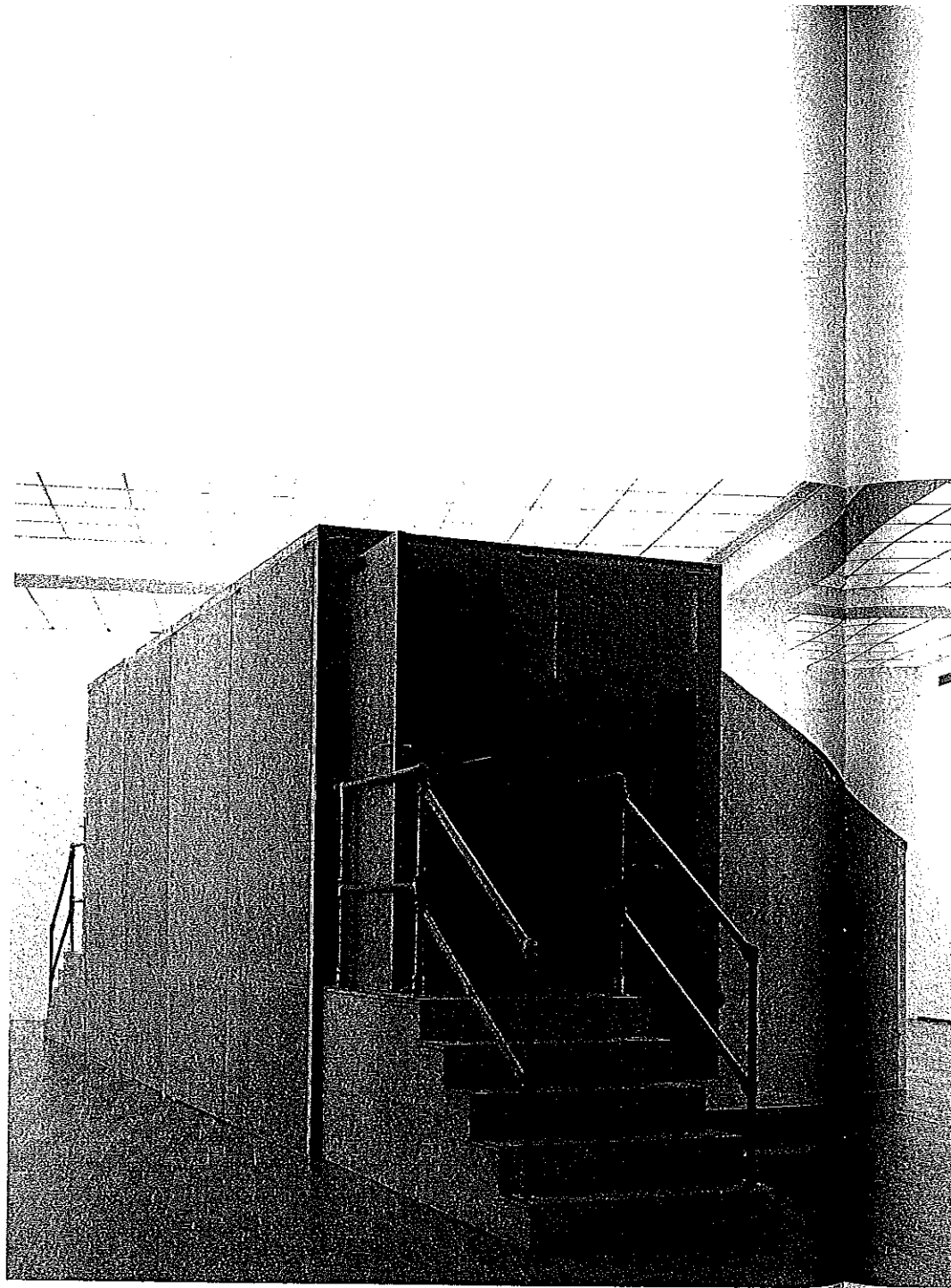


Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, *The Paradise Institute*, 2001, wood, theater seats, video projection, headphones, and mixed media. Installation view, exterior, Kunsthaus Bregenz, Austria. Photo by Larry Lamay.



Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller
by MARIORY JACOBSON

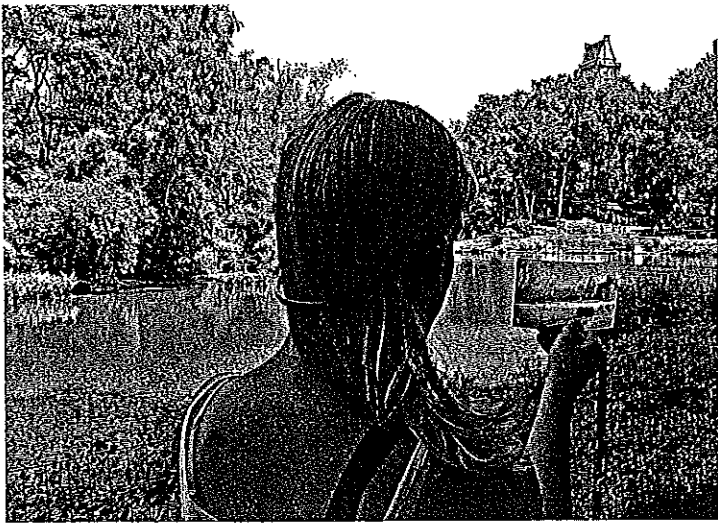
[This is] the adventure that is our future, as we immerse ourselves ever more deeply in our own technologies; as the boundaries between our technologies and ourselves continue to implode; as we inexorably become creatures that we cannot even now imagine. It is a moment which simultaneously holds immense threat and immense promise. I don't want to lose sight of either, because we need to guide ourselves—remember cyber means steer—in all our assembled forms and multiple selves right between the two towers of promise and danger, of desire and technology.

—Allucquère Rosanne Stone¹

In a series of walking tours and installations they have produced in the last decade, Canadian artists Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller make a radical leap in measuring technology's impact on the senses. Using Discmans, videocams, and binaural sound equipment as artistic tools, they embody the diffidence of a global information culture both beguiled and betrayed by the promises of the cyber revolution. Their perceptive use of new media captures the postmodern condition in a way that few others have accomplished. By reframing the bipolar disposition of contemporary life vis-à-vis self-identity, reality, communication, memory, and desire, they imagine a sensorium that dramatizes the complex nature of these dichotomous dissonances in our individual being.

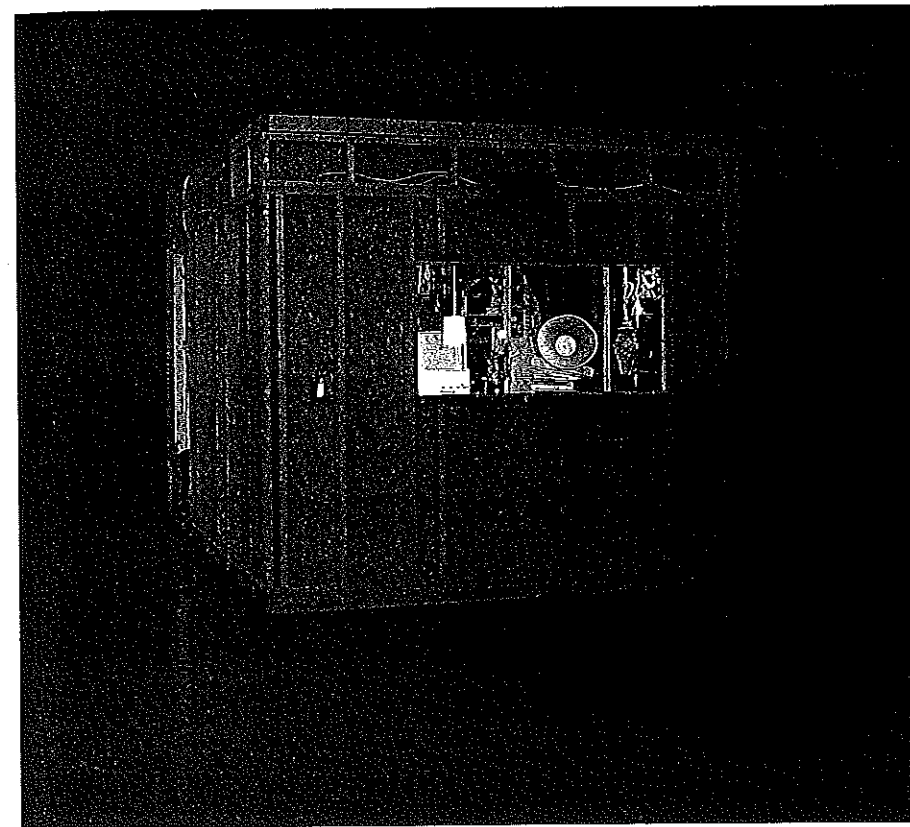
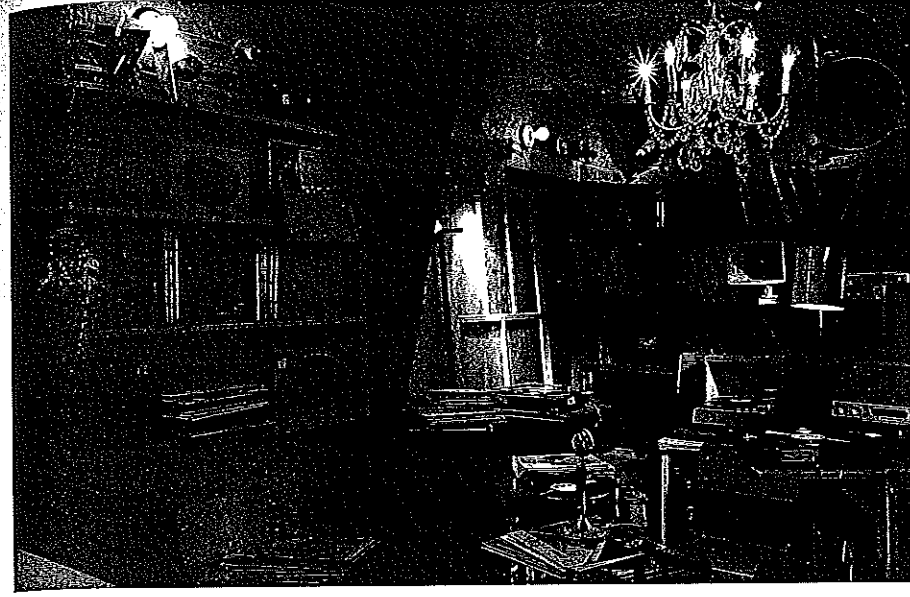
Rapid advances in binaural audio technology have allowed the artists to record surround sound on multiple tracks, using sophisticated computerized editing equipment to complete a final tape. The preliminary track recordings are like sketches for their multidimensional sound sculptures, in which aural comprehension is entirely true to life. In some of the latest walks and installations, ambient noises are stored on digital audio tapes with up to thirty-two tracks of voice and background sound. Amazingly, we may hear the ocean and the seagulls barking when we are inland; feel the raindrops when the sun is shining; gaze at churches, bells, and organs in our mind's eye; and witness a brutal past come to life—guns firing, ambulance sirens blaring, soldiers marching, and screams of torment in the stillness of an idyllic pastoral landscape. Within a clean and tidy place, we may even sniff the stench of rotten food or inhale the scent of a long-lost love.

Janet Cardiff, *Her Long Black Hair*, 2004, audio walk with photographs, 46 minutes, Central Park, New York. Photo by Tom Powell, courtesy the Public Art Fund.



While Cardiff and Miller occasionally include prerecorded film footage and even photographs in their works, sound is the primary medium in their ongoing artistic itinerary. Typically in the walking tours, the listener picks up an audiocassette at a kiosk and, following the instructions of "Janet" the tour guide, pursues a prescribed route along a path. Some works take place in museums, others in parks or urban settings. Instead of hearing the standard audioguide tape, the listener is immediately plunged into a discordant world where reality, reverie, and fiction coexist. Before long, "Janet's" memories seem implanted into our consciousness. Our proprioceptive sense heightened, we are thinking, touching, and smelling in unison with our guide. At first we are soothed by "Janet's" breathy, almost hypnotic commands: "Try to walk with the sound of my footsteps, so that we can stay together." "Turn left." "Turn right." "Stop here." But soon we begin to feel the anxiety of displacement—that we may lose our way, relinquish our own memories, abandon our own desires, distrust our own senses. Sounds and dialogue become so authentic we find ourselves removing our headsets to distinguish actuality from invention. Disjointed stimuli are downloaded into the body of the listener, as if by computer command. As the synaesthetic aura becomes unbearably intense, the very notion of the self is called into question. Whose future and past, whose dreams and nightmares, whose comforts and fears, whose touch, whose smell, whose sounds, whose lovers, whose identity are we inhabiting? Are we avatar, replicant, cyborg, or some artistic amalgamation of them all? Yet the rhythm of two sets of footsteps, ours and hers, becomes a kind of sonic heartbeat of the work, retracting the metamorphosis. Our separate realities are further confirmed as we note that the images and sounds we encounter do not always correspond to Cardiff's original observations.

Opera for a Small Room, 2005, the latest in a series of discrete structures Cardiff and Miller have made for gallery spaces, will have its first United States showing in *Sensorium*.² The work explores the precepts and pretenses of the performance genre, just as *The Paradise Institute*, 2001, the installation for which the artists received the Venice Biennale's Special Jury and Benesse Prizes, was in essence a laboratory for the study of cinema. The idea for *Opera* began with a collection of opera records, each marked with the name R. Denney, that Cardiff and Miller found in a second-hand store in Salmon Arm, British Columbia. Intrigued that a person living in the "wilds of Canada" would be obsessed with a musical form so foreign to his culture, the artists set about inventing an "opera" of his life. (There is a bit of autobiographical fantasy at play here. Although they travel widely and have a residence in Berlin, Cardiff and Miller spend a great deal of time on their farm in remote Grindrod, British Columbia.)



Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, *Opera for a Small Room* (interior and exterior), 2005, mixed media installation (8 x 9 x 14 ft.) with synchronized lighting and sound ("Roadkill Crow Song," 20 minutes: composition/voice George Bures Miller; guitar, drums, mixing Titus Maderlechner; bass guitar, organ, orchestration Tilman Ritter). Fabrication assistance by Kyle Miller and Carlo Crovato. Courtesy the artists; Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin, and Luhring Augustine Gallery, New York. © Kunsthaus Bregenz, Austria. Photos by Markus Trotter.

In *Opera for a Small Room*, what appears to be a one-room cabin occupies part of a darkened gallery. One cannot enter the construction, though there are two doors ajar, several cracks in the walls into which one can peer, and in front, a large picture window resembling a stage proscenium. The attic-like interior, lit by bare bulbs and thrift-shop chandeliers, is strewn with thousands of records, speakers, and turntables. Lights go down; the susurrations of an orchestra tuning up and an audience taking their seats and then applause is heard. A concert is about to begin, and a recording of a man's voice, slowed to a warble, describes the scene. In the ensuing twenty minutes, his mutterings (sometimes as stage conductor and other times as mournful hermit), prompted by a hypnotist's intonations, mingle with a mixture of arias, cowboy songs, rock 'n' roll, and stock stage effects, like a clap of thunder dimming the lights and the roar of an approaching train shaking the room. This mix of sounds, speeding up and slowing down, disc-jockey fashion, churn imagination and memory into a melodramatic cacophony. Intermittently, a silhouette, like an afterimage or ghost, or perhaps only a shadow of another viewer in the audience, wafts across the space. We are left to wonder: perhaps Dennehy was driven into seclusion by some violent happenstance; perhaps he is just a recluse with an ordinary past; or perhaps he is a failed musical prodigy plagued by a life of regrets. Suddenly the musical mood shifts, syncopated to a crescendo of colored lights, the melodrama ends, and once again the mournful sound portrait of Dennehy's life is resumed.

In this piece, the artists repeatedly underscore the artifice of performance. Given the rare exclusion here of Cardiff's spellbinding voice, the hypnotist may be something like her understudy. The earphones that serve to individualize interactivity in most of Cardiff and Miller's work are also left out. Here, we are one in a throng, returned to the traditional audience role of sedentary receiver of experience. Seen through the picture window, the enigmatic silhouette is theatrical magic. (In a variant of the synaesthetic experience, rather than transforming one sense into another, the flat image urges the viewer to imagine the visual information necessary to complete its sculptural presence. But looking into the room from other angles, one notices in plain sight a rudimentary cardboard head rotating electromechanically. Likewise the world of contemporary make-believe is evident in *Opera's* layered narratives and common to all of Cardiff and Miller's work. Referencing oral tradition, ancient fairy tales and legends metamorphose into cinematic voiceover fragments from cult films, murder mysteries, cyberpunk fantasies, and the melancholic ambience of unrequited love in romance novels and soap operas. And in the virtual realities of Cardiff and Miller, the ultimate imaginary where scripts are deformed with fragmented tales filtered through a flood of information, plots may never conclude. Within the cybernetic sensorium that has come to define our age, the digressive meander of narrative and the denial of closure imply for many thinkers an illusion of immortality and an affirmation of technology's promise of eternal life.³

Taking the temperature of a culture saturated with the fallout of Baudrillard's "fatal strategies," Cardiff and Miller's picture of humanity is surprisingly reaffirming; they are the very embodiment of Sandy Stone's "fast-forward flâneur." But yet, they also caution us about the dangers that lurk: "Psst," we might hear Janet whisper, "there is someone behind you!"

NOTES

1. Allucquère Rosanne Stone, *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age*, paperback ed. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996), 183.

2. The piece premiered in late 2005 in a solo exhibition of the artists' work at Austria's Kunsthaus Bregenz.

3. This strategy of pursuing immortality is described perhaps most incisively by Italian critic Carlo Levi in an introduction to an Italian edition of *Tristram Shandy*: "If a straight line is the shortest distance between two fated and inevitable points, digressions will lengthen it; and if these digressions become so complex, so tangled and tortuous, so rapid as to hide their own tracks, who knows—perhaps death may not find us, perhaps time will lose its way and perhaps we ourselves can remain concealed in our shifting hiding places." Reprinted in Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (New York: Vintage International, 1993), 47.

JANET CARDIFF and GEORGE BURES MILLER

Q: Do you feel ambivalent about technology's impact on the body?

Janet Cardiff: No. I love it. I think computers, cell phones and Discmans are about taking us to different worlds. It doesn't dull your senses, it just increases them because you have to experience things in a more multi-dimensional way.

George Bures Miller: I think Janet's walks do explore the dark side of technology. They make you think about so many issues to do with control and reality, with how we are manipulated by the new technologies and the groups that promote them.

From an interview with Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller by Andrea Tarsia (curator, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London), published in *Whitechapel Magazine*, June 2003.

