

# JANET CARDIFF GEORGE BURES MILLER

PLAYING ROULETTE WITH REALITY  
GHOST MACHINE IN THE HEBBEL-THEATER, BERLIN

BY: MATTHIAS LILIENTHAL | 2005

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At our first meeting, I suggested two possibilities to Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller – a good one and a dumb one. The good idea was for the installation to be set up in a private apartment as a kind of a theatrical walking tour, like the one in Jan Hoet’s *Chambres d’Amis* (a project realized in Ghent in 1986 in which art and urban life engaged directly in a dialog). The other idea was to use a theater that looks like the little reconstructed cinema in the artists’ *The Paradise Institute*, but a bit bigger: the Hebbel-Theater, a beautiful Art Nouveau interior dating from 1908. This is the sort of building that formed the prototype for the cinema auditorium in their installation. Janet replied that she didn’t like the good idea and preferred the dumb alternative.

Both of them were enthusiastic when we visited the Hebbel-Theater. In their friendly, unassuming way they attended performances there over the next twelve months, mixing with the audience and loving to sit in their box. Above them hovered two Art Nouveau angels and an old parchment lampshade.

It was exciting to see how artists who are preoccupied in their work with staging, with theatrical and cinematographic effects, would react to a real theater. They devised an audio and video walk, a genre they’d used in the past, most recently at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Three layers of reality interact in these walks: the spectator moving through the rooms, the modified image of the rooms on the camera display, and the soundtrack guiding the visitor via headphones.

Cardiff and Miller recorded the soundtrack of *Ghost Machine* using an invention made in what was then West Berlin: the *rias Kunstkopf* microphone, a microphone placed in the ears of a dummy human head. On headphones, recordings made in this way give the listener the impression of being surrounded on all sides by really deep space. Combined with the images and with three-dimensional reality, the effect of this sophisticated spatial acoustic is very seductive. Creating an audio and video walk in a place that itself is a kind of illusion machine had a very special appeal to the artists.

To participate in the walk, visitors are given a video camera and headphones at the cloakroom. First, the title, *Ghost Machine*, appears on the camera display. Then, to the accompaniment of sounds from an electric guitar, you see a man carrying an unconscious person across the side of the stage. The image disappears. A woman’s voice asks: “Where am I?” The display then shows reality, with spectators entering the theater foyer. “It’s raining tonight, just like he said it would.” A latecomer rushes in. During these first few seconds, the video walk establishes two almost indistinguishable narrative planes: The music and the unconscious man being carried across the stage suggest a thriller, while at the same time the performance is about to begin in the theater you’re in. The woman is talking about forgetting her keys. “I think objects really do disappear sometimes, or slip out of space for a few moments and then reappear a few minutes later. They do that to me quite often.” This is Janet Cardiff describing her aesthetic program in an apparently off-hand way. A young Chinese woman appears, and you’re asked to follow her movements. “But I’ve been thinking that maybe people do that too ... once in a while we disappear and shift into a different space or a different pocket of time.”

You follow the young woman to the upstairs foyer, trying to collate the image with the surrounding reality, then out onto the balcony. It’s pouring with rain. Every passerby on the street below is turned into an actor – like that woman riding her bike. A car that drives past, you hear moving from left to right.

A young man is standing on the line in the middle of the road. You're told to zoom in on him, and you see that it's the unconscious person from the beginning. "I've been looking for you. What? The best way to become invisible is to act, dress, and walk like another person..." he says to the woman's voice on his mobile, before letting her hear the noise of the traffic through the phone. Then you're requested to return to the foyer and continue the tour.

Cardiff and Miller play with different kinds of reality – a walk, a love story, a philosophical reflection on the nature of identity. You hear the audience laughing. The voice on the headphones whispers tensely: "You've got to help me." The sounds of the guitar are repeated from the beginning. As you descend the stairs, you're warned "Something's wrong here." Everything turns blue. The people in the film are dressed in Twenties-style clothes. The young man is arrested. The Chinese woman is standing there in an evening robe, white makeup on her face. As a contrast, you see the empty foyer. The Chinese woman beckons you upstairs. Stopping on a landing, you find yourself in a car; the rain drums on the roof – another classic thriller ingredient – and the landscape disappears in mist. Now you carry on alone, up to a door behind which a phone is ringing.

The first half of the walk refers constantly to the thriller genre, and the atmosphere becomes claustrophobic when the visitor enters a roughly nine-foot-square room with four doors leading off it. The second half has more to do with theater as a metaphor. Both subjects interest Cardiff and Miller for the opportunities they offer for playing with perception – and in that sense they're not so much concerned about the results. At one point on the tour you encounter Cardiff, appearing in a bit part like Alfred Hitchcock. Camera in hand, you enter a dressing room and are directed to a mirror in which you see yourself. At the very end, the face belonging to the voice you've been hearing all along appears on the display – another abrupt shift of perceptual perspective.

In Cardiff's *The Forty-Part Motet* a piece of sixteenth-century church music, "Spem in Alium", is played through forty loud speakers and the spectator's position in the room determines how he or she perceives the work. In *The Paradise Institute* images expressive of deep-seated fears mingle with scenes from thrillers. In *Ghost Machine* the theater itself becomes the narrative. When visitors taking the tour reach the stage curtain they become actors. They receive applause, and the myths and fears addressed are theirs as well. But the applause comes from a box behind the visitor that is clearly empty. In ever new variants, undermining perceptual certainty is the central focus of these artists' work.

Something truly strange happens during the walk, something I can only describe, not explain: You move into a completely different world. A major factor in this is the sound, with its astonishingly realistic spatial effects, but Cardiff and Miller also leave behind clues in the visual quotations, deconstructing the theatrical context and eventually generating wide-awake illusion. At the end, you wake up as though you've been daydreaming or sleepwalking. Your perceptive faculties have been sharpened: In twenty-five minutes you've seen a thriller and a theatrical performance, and you feel as fresh as if you'd taken a nap at exactly the right time of day. This is the kind of waking dream you could become addicted to.