

JANET CARDIFF GEORGE BURES MILLER

INTERVIEW BETWEEN JANET CARDIFF AND
KELLY GORDON (HIRSHORN MUSEUM)

KELLY GORDON: What led you to develop your audio walks?

JANET CARDIFF: The development of the audio walks came about through a totally serendipitous experience. I happened to press rewind while walking and taping in the field and when I replayed it, listening with my headphones, I was fascinated by the layering of the past onto the present. It had a strange quality of creating a new world, blending together the physical and the virtual. I was also very excited by how my recorded body walking and talking created such an intense physical presence for me, feeling like there was another woman that was part of me but separate.

KG: How do you create such an intense 3D sound scapes?

JC: The technique that I use is called binaural audio. I record right on the site, following the exact route that you eventually listen to it. The recording system is two microphones mounted in the ears of a dummy head. Because of the head shape it reproduces the way we hear. I get many looks and comments from people as I wander around with this blue (hairdressers dummy) head held out in front of me.

KG: How does location influence the development of each project? How was working on the National Mall compared to working on projects in other cities?

JC: Location is really very important to the content of a walk. The mall was one of the most difficult and the most fascinating sites I've been presented with. It was fascinating because of the abundance of important historic actions that have happened there. It was difficult because in the end I had way too much information and too many recordings and not enough space to include them so the editing process was pretty extreme. Also I have to say that doing a walk in the capital of America in this current political situation was antithetical to my creative process. I had to turn off my negative feelings about the Bush administration in order to produce the piece. It made me realize how difficult it is not to become political in Washington.

KG: How did work on this project begin? What was the most difficult aspect to develop?

JC: The first part of the process was finding a route that interested me... a beginning, a middle and an intimate location for the end. After establishing the route the next part in the process was to do a lot of walking, listening and looking. This is how I find themes that echo the location. In this piece I concentrate on a couple of themes. One is the use of water as a metaphor for the fluidity of time and for connecting political ideas and people. Another interest for me in Washington became the prevalence of political illusion and working with that metaphorically. Just as a piece of mirror found on the sidewalk becomes a chunk of sky the varying soundscapes, such as an audience clapping around you, a car passing, or a band playing, make you question the truth of anything you hear.

Concurrent with my walking and thinking I researched a lot of the history of Washington to find things that would inspire me. I also interviewed several local people in the hopes of using their first hand accounts. Some of these weren't used in the final piece but gave me insights.

KG: Can you describe what techniques and strategies you use in *Words drawn in water* to give participants a kind of out-of-body experience?

JC: Sound has an innate ability to transport you out of your body so if you give an audience various soundscapes you can transport them through their imagination into many different places. For example the sound of ghostly people talking around you can be startling, or the sound effects of horses going by can give you a sense of the past. I include simple but effective effects such as a fly buzzing your ear, passing musicians or a helicopter flying over to take you out of your body into different imaginary spaces.

KG: Could you comment on the play between public space and private experience embodied in *Words drawn in water*?

JC: There is an intimate relationship between the artist and listener created by the audio walks. My thoughts are transmitted through the headset creating a very private space for the audience in the midst of a very public area. It's like being an anonymous person walking in a city. Your thoughts are your own creating a mix between the private and the public.

KG: Are there particular elements in this audio walk that will surprise people who are familiar with your work?

JC: I think that this work is very much in the genre of my other pieces. I don't think there is anything surprisingly different but there will be surprising moments. That's what I hope for... the unexpected taking you into a different world for a few moments making you feel a bit of magic. That's what art is all about isn't it?

Interview taken from:

Interview with the artist and project curator Kelly Gordon, July 2005

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