

Disruptive Notions of Art History in Janet Cardiff's *Words Drawn on Water*

Janet Cardiff's *Words Drawn on Water* begins by picking up an iPod. You place the headphones in your ears and press play. *Words Drawn Water* is the only selection. It starts outside the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, DC. Cardiff's voice slides into your surroundings. She begins speaking only to you. During her narrative, a sound barrier emerges between yourself and surrounding pedestrians. I hear footfalls that are unaccompanied by a person. The 33-minute walk begins with the sculpture facing the fountain of the Hirshhorn Museum. It continues through the Sculpture Garden, past Rodin's sculptures. During the course of the walk, you can see the National Mall. It ends in the Peacock Room, by James McNeill Whistler, in the Freer Gallery.¹ Let us listen to it.

In this paper, I argue how contemporary works such as those of Janet Cardiff's disrupt art historical norms. It implies a direct relationship between art objects and writing. These norms describe history in totalizing, universal, chronological or patriarchal terms. It also implies the ability of art objects to direct the course of linguistic description. Works such as Cardiff's break the continuity by bringing corporeality into the process. Her body experientially makes the work, and the listener completes it. She creates multi-sensorial settings, modeling how art works shift experiences and expectations. I use ideas of in-betweenness and simultaneity to illustrate how her work and process rewrite histories, integrating multiplicity, narrative and difference.

After introducing Janet Cardiff, I explain how she makes her audio walks. This process and how it is used in *Words Drawn on Water* ruptures conventions by its use of rhythm, how it makes spaces and relation to power. These three ideas are integral to developing strategies for writing history in non-hegemonic, mutual and associatively based terms.

Janet Cardiff is a Canadian artist residing in Berlin and British Columbia, Canada. She

often works with her husband, George Bures Miller. Their works are sound-based installations. They use audio to make new environments. Cardiff describes sounds as innately able 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.” She uses simple sounds such as a bee flying or traffic to make a virtual space for the listener. The spaces she and Miller make are fictitious. An example is *Opera for a Small Room*. It is an installation work utilizing over one hundred LPs. Cardiff and Miller constructed a room for an imaginary person whom they theorize may listen to all of these different records. The viewer does not ever see this person, but instead feels their presence through lighting effects. However, as in the circumstances of some of her audio walks, she works alone. For the purpose of this paper, I focus on the work she has made without Miller.

Cardiff’s walks are audio guides for a place. You are given a CD Player or iPod and told to sit or stand in a certain spot and press play. Cardiff’s voice emits from the headphones, directing you where to walk, when to turn, what to stop at. In the background are birds singing, footfalls and traffic. Cardiff works from real life. She does not digitally construct the sounds. They are recorded on site, recorded as they happen. So at some time during the walk, each sound actually occurred (although not at the same time you may be listening to it). Cardiff makes the walk on the exact path that the listener eventually follows. The recording system is called binaural audio. It picks up sound without any unusual static noise. The result is deceitfully convincing. As I listen to the sound score, I believe there is a person standing behind me. It makes a three dimensional experience. Cardiff uses two microphones mounted in the ears of a dummy head. The dummy head is used so that Cardiff feels she is actually speaking to someone.¹

¹ http://www.cardiffmiller.com/press/texts/kg_jc-interview.pdf

Cardiff started making the audio walks by accident. While walking and taping, she happened to press rewind. She listened with her headphones and heard the layering of the past onto the present. She considered this integrating the physical and the virtual, making a new world. It created an intensely physical presence for her, especially how she felt so strongly related to the bodiless voice that was her own.

Cardiff makes a new rhythm between expectant norms and sounds. When the work is played, I experience Cardiff's prerecorded narrative over sounds I am currently experiencing. The audio walk overlaps with my visual experience. It disturbs causal expectations between sight and sound. As I listen, Cardiff's voice slides into my surroundings. When I strain listening for her next utterance, the actual surrounding sound of my own physical location becomes a background. A match is struck as she describes Whistler's absent presence. Her construction takes precedence. She marks time non-linearly by describing objects, people and places that are not physically present. She describes a house the fountain originated near, as though it is possible through the viewing of the fountain to be near the house that is fabricated in the aural recording. I listen carefully for intervals between her voice, my experience and surrounding sounds. There is a sudden flaw between sight and sound.

The layering sounds lift us, the listener, out of our own experience. The reconstruction of this aural experience reminds us our own ability to hear. I realize there are expectations with sound and vision, such as hearing footfalls followed by seeing individuals. Her audio walk disrupts normative notions through her rhythmic constructions that point out how much we take for granted between sound and visual relations. While my body experiences the walk, I am also experiencing Cardiff's walk, the research she undertook, and the original setting for the Peacock

Room and fountain. Cardiff's layering creates an experiential memory of these acts, as well of the surrounding buildings and location. Listening, I perform the memory. Cardiff shows non-linear perspective by bringing multiple times into her audio walks. It constructs a space for Whistler, objects previous owners, numerous visitors and museum staff, generally any person who may have interacted or experienced the works Cardiff includes. She brings attention to chronological, historical views and remakes time as multiple and layered perspectives. It disrupts a dominant discourse by conversing with it.

Cardiff makes intimate, imaginative spaces for the listener within the literal physical space. Cardiff made *Words Drawn on Water* specific to the Hirshhorn Museum. The Hirshhorn is located along the National Mall, one of many museums outlining a large green space. The National Mall was built for the purpose of public accessibility to open green areas.ⁱⁱ The Senate Building, National Gallery of Art and Washington Monument are visible from the Hirshhorn. This setting forms a distinct historical and political landscape. *Words Drawn on Water* does not override the history of the National Mall. It provides space, alongside that history, for a different experience.

Her audio walk seamlessly makes a world identical to this physical, visual world. The binaural process records exactly what is heard. Cardiff builds the sound score from sounds she recorded on-site at the Mall. This replication does not reiterate norms; it creates a new world that is a seamless combination of the two. Replayed over live sound, the virtual, recorded soundscape mimics the physical location. When I complete the work as a listener, I experience a space that is available only to me, layered over my physical experience. I can hear her voice and surrounding individuals do not. I feel Cardiff walking with me, constructing a virtual space. Despite each listener hearing the same narrative, they all have distinctly different experiences.

The surrounding noises at the time that they listen are different, depending on the time of day. It means the work is new every time it is experienced. The over-layering makes an imaginative, fictitious landscape. Cardiff's geographical construct is within the visual and physical location.

Her research methods make it possible for negotiating these multiple locations. After marking the path for the listener, she does field research. She repeats the walk, searching for affiliations and themes that speak to the location. Cardiff examines history in the location through the surrounding buildings. By physically immersing herself, she takes on the location's themes in a very particular way. She intimately knows the landscape. In *Words Drawn on Water*, she researched the National Mall, stories around the fountains and political histories. Water emerged as a theme. She noticed how water was affiliated in the area through underground water systems channeling to various fountains. According to Cardiff, "water is a metaphor for the fluidity of time and for connecting political ideas and people."² She uses the fountain's association with water to relate Whistler's Peacock Room traveling across water to the Freer Gallery.ⁱⁱⁱ Whistler originally built the room for wealthy ship owner Frederick R. Leyland in Liverpool, England. Charles Lang Freer purchased the room in 1904 and bequeathed it to in the Freer Gallery.^{iv}

Cardiff's research writes a narrative without replicating the institutional histories of the Hirshhorn and surrounding institutions. Instead, Cardiff writes history in-between. She does not critique how the Peacock Room, fountains or statues came to their current locations. Cardiff also does not illuminate factual background information. The audio walk is not a formal guide, such as a docent-led tour. She speaks in narrative form, alluding to events and objects. The narrative form disarms research from taking a universalist stance. It illuminates silent histories around art

² <http://www.cardiffmiller.com/artworks/walks/wordsdrawn.html>

objects, such as how they were emotionally attached to the people owning them. This particular exploration creates an empathetic bond between contemporary and past users. Narrative makes the audio walk personal for each listener. The walk functions between an objective analysis and subjective experience. It creates a history using several resources and perspectives.

The audio walks give power to the listener through Cardiff's directions. The listener is enlivened from a static viewer to a mobile participant. She clearly tells us when to turn, when to take a pause and where to look (although what she tells us to look at is not always there). Her voice is a constant companion. The walk mobilizes the listener to go beyond museum walls. I do not stand in front of paintings. I do not stroll through gallery spaces, just glancing at the visual culture. The accoutrements of art-objects, such as placards or wall stenciled introductions are absent. Cardiff's voice makes me more deeply invested in walking around the museum. In a heightened state, I pay more attention to where I am going. Cardiff's work makes space for agency through situating the audio walk outside of the museum space.

The walk extends the reach of the institution. While it can be said such an act means the Hirshhorn's power reaches into surrounding landscapes, it also makes relations between ideologies of museums and institutions visible. I realize the Hirshhorn and Freer Gallery staff shape the public space between the buildings' physical boundaries. The land is cultivated into supporting these institutions, making the buildings and their associated ideologies monolithic in scale to ordinary people. Cardiff does not attempt overcoming these ideologies. It does not try defeating the status quo, the archetypes of representation, by offering another status quo or archetype. Cardiff works in-between by taking the listener out of the Hirshhorn's institutional boundaries and into the 'outside' space. During *Words Drawn on Water*, Cardiff only alludes to relations between the Peacock Room and the Gallery's ability to acquire objects. In the audio

walk, Cardiff negotiates in-between, making a path for the listener to follow. The listener can go off the map projected by Cardiff, although I felt compelled to follow her directions absolutely.

Words Drawn on Water does not directly undermine power relations surrounding the Hirshhorn. In fact, Cardiff tried very hard to make the work apolitical. In 2005, she described “doing a walk in the capital of America in this current political situation was antithetical to my creative process.”^v The narrative does not describe historical political acts such as the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom that featured Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., speech. It also does not include surrounding buildings of political office, such as the United States Capitol. If Cardiff were to directly engage with these histories, she would only be replicating normative narratives. She would recreate the status quo in attempting to defeat it. *Words Drawn on Water* does not engage in hegemonic discourse. Cardiff’s replication of physical space offers critique by imitation.

Cardiff’s *Words Drawn on Water* implicitly deconstructs monolithic and universal strategies by questioning the ‘truth’ of seen and heard materials. She layers her constructed aural experience with my own. Her voice speaks as my interior consciousness. The invisible body directing my path reveals how unseen individuals shape my actions. Cardiff describes objects that are not really there; sounds are heard without correlation to an object. The gap between seeing and hearing disjoints a stable corporeal experience. It creates an interval for questioning assumptions. I cannot trust my senses in this mediated environment. I cannot take for granted any kind of experience. I must immediately negotiate what is happening between sight, sound and movement. It re-orientates the Hirshhorn, the Freer Gallery and the National Mall’s stability and permanence. Instead of focal points, they become components of my experience. Their relationships between the overall landscape and Cardiff’s voice matter more. The relational

strategy means examining how different sounds and sights interact rather than categorizing.

In Janet Cardiff's *Walking on Water*, her audio walk and process intervene in art historical norms. Her research methods relate working between by investigating themes alongside histories, rather than unifying. Cardiff created a water affiliation in her experience of the Hirshhorn and used it metaphorically. It constructed new environments swaying between public and private space of the Mall and the government-funded Hirshhorn. She layers sound, bringing attention to flaws in linear forms. The multi-sensorial environment offers how art works defamiliarize the familiar. Cardiff creates intervals between sight and sound for personal experience. Each device she uses is sustained through the listener's temporal engagement with the walk. The listener completes *Words Drawn on Water* differently each time. The walk invents a fictitious narrative, grounded in physical buildings.

Implicitly, Cardiff addresses how art history can direct itself towards performative engagement in socially present material and arguments. The performative aspect disarms the definitivity of normative research practices. Normative research practices institute a hierarchy of meaning that relies on exteriority. Performative research, sustained by Cardiff's process and integration of many voices, utilizes interiority and exteriority. As an art historian, performative tactics means physical, tactile engagement with art objects as well as conversation with artists concerning their work. It means historicizing through negotiation of difference. It also utilizes working in an associative tone, researching through interpretation rather than Truth with a capital T. Cardiff sought a thematic relation between the Hirshhorn and the Freer Gallery instead of factual documentation. Sustaining a discourse for art history to investigate in between cultural production and mediated image proposes how art objects intervene and construct our contemporary experience. It posits art historians as ever more responsible for bringing objects,

images and experiences from the past into shifting relations of the present, and in the process shift the meaning and form of the past and the present, making a path for the continuation of understanding our contemporary experience.

ⁱ <http://www.cardiffmiller.com/artworks/walks/wordsdrawn.html>

ⁱⁱ ^ "National Register Information System". *National Register of Historic Places*. National Park Service. 2009-01-23.

ⁱⁱⁱ http://www.cardiffmiller.com/press/texts/kg_jc-interview.pdf

^{iv} <http://www.asia.si.edu/exhibitions/current/peacock.htm>, accessed 4-13-09.

^v http://www.cardiffmiller.com/press/texts/kg_jc-interview.pdf