

Janet Cardiff & George Bures Miller:

The House of Books Has No Windows

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Franz Kafka, in his book *Amerika*, published in 1927, describes with startling precision the hypnotic effect of technology and mass culture. Karl, the hero of the story, having just arrived in New York, gazes over the balcony of an apartment block at the teeming sights, smells and sounds of the city. He describes the ‘enveloping light ... with an effect as palpable to the dazzled eye as if a glass roof stretched over the street were being violently smashed at every moment’. This image is still relevant today and it is within this context that we might understand Janet Cardiff and George Bures-Miller’s fragmented narratives. The impetus of storytelling drives their collaborative, multi-sensory installations at Modern Art Oxford, where the exhibition is sensitively laid out so that each space enhances the impact and flow of this series of memory theatres.

The sound of Janet Cardiff’s voice is compelling and memorable due to its intimacy, like the reading voice of a friend,

lover or mother, and the artists are known for narrated walks using Walkman technology. Fragments of narrative, instructions, collaged sounds from movies, sometimes pleasurable combinations and sometimes anxious, create a form of storytelling that is like lucid dreaming. When integrated here with sculptural objects and spaces the effect – as various media correspond – triggers an intensification of the total sensuous experience.

In the installation *The Dark Pool* (1995) the storytelling is most tangible. A separate room with one doorway, like a studio where aesthetic experiments are conducted, it is full of clutter and reflects the apparent sensibility of a collector. Dramatically lit by bulbs dangling from the ceiling, closer inspection of tabletop debris reveals that some objects are grouped as vignettes, like a half-finished snack. Some objects function as Surrealist object poems, such as a bird's wing wired to brass plates where we are instructed to insert a photograph into this 'Wish Machine' prototype. Elsewhere found objects generate a sense of *deja vu*. Like Adorno's 'Valery Proust Museum', objects dislocated from their original context combine with a babel of sound fragments to provoke involuntary memory. The audience meanders through this work, at times sitting, reading or lying down, and becomes so

much a part of the set that it can be startling when a figure moves and reveals itself to be real and not sculpture.

Lucid dreaming is a useful simile for the literary mechanisms at play in this memory theatre but it is not quite accurate. The artists describe a notion of the self that disembodies and re-embodies through the conscious experience of editing and re-assembly of meaning. The proposition is that, in an electronic era, hyperreality may be discerned, articulated and resisted through the pleasurable free-play of narrative. Certainly the influence of Marshall McLuhan's notion of electronic media as an extension of our bodies' senses and, more recently, Celia Lury's theory of experimental 'editing' of a shifting conception of self all help this idea to connect. But in the installation it is probably the presence and responses of other human beings in this elaborate set that tends to make us conscious of production and artifice.

The idea of a place where storytelling occurs, like a porch or theatre for example, anchors the narratives. Susan Stewart has written about the construction of narrative through the use of the miniature and the gigantic as metaphors. The miniature implies an 'interiorised space and time' while the gigantic is always public. Many of the installations use combinations of these forms: in *The Dark Pool* the intense longing for miniature space locates the pool

as a tiny stage, set in a suitcase that is internally lit, whereas *The House of Books Has No Windows* (2008) defines the audience as giants with its 3ft-high doorway. Created for this exhibition from a sketchbook of unrealised projects, the latter project has no audible component. Made entirely of stacked books, with mitred corners and corbelled roof, it looks like a child's playhouse. The spines of the books face outwards so that inside they form a variegated relief as different sizes protrude into the space, giving the appearance of a patterned visual code.

As a finale, the theatrical installation *The Killing Machine*, (2007) initially very provocative, is quite different from the other works. The catalogue states that this work is about politics, and specifically about American capital punishment, while incarceration of prisoners without due process at Guantanamo Bay is also implied. The audience must choose to be complicit; there is a push-button to start graceful, raptor-like robots that pantomime the killing of an imaginary body. This interpretation of Kafka's story, 'In the Penal Colony', is abbreviated to a five-minute experience. As Walter Benjamin has pointed out, making politics beautiful is always problematic and whether this installation provokes, like Ed Keinholz' early work to which the artists refer or

whether the seductive professionalism of the work merely produces a fetishised shock and awe remains unresolved.

Stephen Lee is a sculptor.