

Janet Cardiff: Forty-Part Motet

Organized by the National Gallery of Canada



at the Surrey Art Gallery
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Surrey Art Gallery
13750-88 Avenue
Surrey, BC V3W 3L1
(1 block east of King George
Highway, in Bear Creek Park)
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Janet Cardiff: Forty-Part Motet, 2001. 40-track audio installation,
14 minutes in duration. Collection of the National Gallery of Canada,
Ottawa. Image courtesy of the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal.
Photo: Richard-Max Tremblay

About Janet Cardiff

Janet Cardiff was born in Brussels, Ontario in 1957 and studied at Queen's University (BFA) and the University of Alberta (MVA). She works in collaboration with her partner George Bures Miller, born 1960, Vegreville, Alberta. Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller currently live and work in Berlin, and Grinrod BC.

Cardiff's installations and walking pieces are often audio-based. She has been included in exhibitions such as: Present Tense, Nine Artists in the Nineties, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, NowHere, Louisiana Museum, Denmark, The Museum as Muse, Museum of Modern Art, the Carnegie International '99/00, the Tate Modern Opening Exhibition as well as a project commissioned by Artangel in London.

Cardiff represented Canada at the São Paulo Art Biennial in 1998, and at the 6th Istanbul Biennial in 1999 with her partner George Bures Miller. Cardiff and Bures Miller represented Canada the 49th Venice Biennale with "The Paradise Institute" (2001). The artists won La Biennale di Venezia Special Award at Venice, presented to Canadian artists for the first time and the Benesse prize, recognizing artists who try to break new artistic ground with an experimental and pioneering spirit. A recent mid-career retrospective, *Janet Cardiff: A Survey of Works, Including Collaborations with George Bures Miller*, opened at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, Queens, in 2001 and has travelled to Montréal, Oslo, and Turin.

In 2005, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden of the Smithsonian Institute commissioned and exhibited Cardiff's work "Words Drawn in Water". Cardiff and George Bures Miller's works are included in private and public collections in Canada, the United States and Europe

More about the artist can be found here:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Janet_Cardiff
<http://cardiffmiller.com/index.html>

About the Artwork

Created by Canadian artist, Janet Cardiff in 2001, *Forty-Part Motet* is a reworking of “Spem in Alium,” a composition completed in 1575, by British composer, Thomas Tallis. It is a sculpturally conceived, 40-track audio installation that will fill the large exhibition hall of the Surrey Art Gallery with an extraordinary audio experience. It consists of forty separately recorded voices, played back through forty speakers strategically placed throughout the exhibition space.

Cardiff recorded the performance of the composition, sung by Salisbury Cathedral Choir. Each of the voices was recorded separately and each voice is played back through one of forty speakers that circle the exhibit hall. As visitors walk around the Gallery, they can listen to each of the voices in turn, or to all of them together from the middle of the room.

As Cardiff explains: *Most people experience this piece now in their living room in front of only two speakers, the spatial construction is lost in the mix. Even in a live concert, the audience is separated from the individual voices. Only the performers are able to hear the person standing next to them singing a different harmony. I wanted to be able to . . . “climb inside” the music, connecting with the separate voices. I am also interested in how sound may construct a space in a sculptural way and how the audience may choose a path through this physical yet virtual space.*

Materials: 40 loud speakers mounted on stands, placed in an oval, amplifiers, playback computer
Duration: 14 min. loop with 11 min. of music and 3 min. of intermission

Credits:

Sung by: Salisbury Cathedral Choir
Recording and Postproduction by: SoundMoves
Edited by George Bures Miller
Produced by Field Art Projects

Comments by the artist:

"While listening to a concert you are normally seated in front of the choir, in traditional audience position. With this piece I want the audience to be able to experience a piece of music from the viewpoint of the singers. Every performer hears a unique mix of the piece of music. Enabling the audience to move throughout the space allows them to be intimately connected with the voices. It also reveals the piece of music as a changing construct. As well I am interested in how sound may physically construct a space in a sculptural way and how a viewer may choose a path through this physical yet virtual space.

I placed the speakers around the room in an oval so that the listener would be able to really feel the sculptural construction of the piece by Tallis. You can hear the sound move from one choir to another, jumping back and forth, echoing each other and then experience the overwhelming feeling as the sound waves hit you when all of the singers are singing."

More about the artwork *Forty-Part Motet*

<http://cardiffmiller.com/artworks/inst/motet.html>

Youtube links

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LfJ9Z4O8ZJw>

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U6nCFy_81n8

Online reviews of *Forty-Part Motet*

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/12/06/AR2005120601697.html>

"40 Part Motet," Cardiff's riff on Thomas Tallis's "Spem in Alium," demonstrates how beauty can be formed from bits and pieces that in themselves are rather jarring. (By Timothy Hursley -- Museum Of Modern Art/copyright Janet Cardiff)

NEW YORK -- Somewhere around the middle of the 16th century, the Tudor composer Thomas Tallis wrote his famous "Spem in Alium," in which 40 singers' voices spin out variations on an initial sacred theme. It is regarded as one of the most soul-stirring pieces of music ever written. It gets even better in "40 Part Motet," a riff on Tallis's work by sound artist Janet Cardiff. She completed it in 2001 and it's now on display in the reinstalled contemporary galleries at the Museum of Modern Art.

The premise is simple. Cardiff got the "gentlemen and boys" of an English cathedral choir to perform the Tallis composition. She recorded each voice with a separate microphone onto a separate track. At MoMA, Cardiff plays back all 40 channels through 40 speakers, arrayed at ear height on the periphery of a spacious room.

Stand in the middle of the gallery and you get a kind of standard, home-theater experience of Tallis's ethereal polyphony -- though with a threatening sense that the choir has you surrounded and may yet close in.

But walk around the room, listening speaker by speaker, and the Tudor composition begins to pull apart. The snippets of tune sung by each voice make little sense heard on their own; they become disjointed notes, like something by a radical modern composer. Long moments of silence are broken by blasts of sound as Tallis's notes process around the room.

The Renaissance piece, which normally seems about sheer beauty of tone, sounds close to ugly when decomposed. The boy trebles, pride of any English choir, sometimes sound like yelping puppies; a talented bass can seem to be a tone-deaf bear. And we become unusually aware of the person behind each voice; for once we aren't hearing disembodied strains of song. The boys are definitely boys (we hear them gossiping as the choir prepares to sing). The men come off as living people, with individual quirks and characters, rather than human instruments joined in an abstract symphony.

In "40 Part Motet," you get a shock when you realize what strange things go into building beauty. But also a reaffirmation of the miracle of art: Fragile human effort, almost painfully awkward, can come together into something worthy of divinity.

Blake Gopnik From *Janet Cardiff, a Sound Much Sweeter Than the Sum of Its Parts*. Washington Post: Wednesday, December 7, 2005; Page C12

<http://www.tate.org.uk/liverpool/exhibitions/janetcardiff/>

Janet Cardiff *Forty-Part Motet* 2001 (British Edition)

Tate Gallery website: Past exhibition information

Tate Gallery: Canadian artist Janet Cardiff (b 1957) is best known for her numerous audio works and films, often created in collaboration with her partner George Bures Miller.

Thomas Tallis, one of the most influential English composers of sixteenth century, wrote Spem in Alium nunquam habui, a choral work for eight choirs of five voices, to mark the fortieth birthday of Queen Elizabeth I in 1575. This piece of music deals with transcendence and humility, both important issues to a Catholic composer during a time when the Catholic faith was suppressed by the Sovereignty.

Using this piece of secular music as a starting point and working with four male voices (bass, baritone, alto and tenor) and child sopranos, Cardiff has replaced each voice with an audio speaker. The speakers are set at an average head height and spaced in such a way that viewers can listen to different voices and experience different combinations and harmonies as they progress through the work.

A few moments before the music begins the choir's preparations can be heard along with fragments of conversations and the choir leader's encouraging comments to the performers. All of this builds up to the sublime moment when the first solitary and plaintive voice is heard.

With Forty-Part Motet Cardiff offers a very personal and intimate engagement with the Tallis music, but one that is experienced in an open and public way:

Even in a live concert the audience is separated from the individual voices. Only the performers are able to hear the person standing next to them singing in a different harmony. I wanted to be able to 'climb inside' the music connecting with the separate voices. I am also interested in how the audience may choose a path through this physical yet virtual space.

<http://cardiffmiller.com/press/texts/bloomberg01.01.pdf>

Forty Harmonious Voices Drown Out Your Woes: Cardiff at MoMA

October 1, 2006 Bloomberg.com

Jan. 10 (Bloomberg) -- Videos of self-flagellating performance artists and paintings of mangled bodies open the current installation of the Museum of Modern Art's permanent collection of contemporary art. These works kindly remind us that the world is still full of death, destruction and general dissatisfaction.

So the sudden sound of 40 singing voices arrives as an unusually potent balm. They emanate from an installation by Berlin-based Canadian artist Janet Cardiff called "Forty-Part Motet: A Reworking of 'Spem in Alium' by Thomas Tallis" (2001), one of the highlights of the museum's collection.

It consists of 40 high-fidelity speakers on tall stands -- about average ear height -- arranged in a circle in a corner room. Depending on when you enter the installation, you will hear nothing, muffled coughs or the slow-building contrapuntal voices of what seem to be angels on earth.

Cardiff, 48, recorded each voice individually in the Salisbury Cathedral Choir as the group performed "Spem in Alium," a motet composed by Tallis in 1575. The title is part of a line in the work, "Spem in alium numquam habui praeter in te Deus Israel," which translates as: I have never put my hope in any other but in you God of Israel.

Punk Singer

Silent, each standing speaker looks like the machine version of a punk singer, skinny, black-clad and indifferent. Impatient visitors shrug and leave, feeling like victims of yet another conceptual art piece about the impersonality of institutions or some such.

Then a throat clears loudly from one speaker, announcing the start of the 14-minute piece. Cardiff also recorded the moments before the performance, as choir members cough, shuffle their feet and discuss the last take. Each speaker emits one voice. Press your ear close to one, and it reveals private conversations: "Sounded a lot better after that one," one man pronounces.

A high soprano cuts through the air, and the room's atmosphere immediately changes. The formal museum-going experience -- couples shuffling past great works, art students peering in to read wall labels -- dissolves as visitors cluster in the center of the room, letting sound wash over them. Waves of polyphonic chants in Latin, from eight choirs with five singers each, echo off the museum's stone floors.

Transformation

I have rarely been so moved by a work of art in a museum or, for that matter, by a piece of music in a performance hall. The fusion of Elizabethan devotional music and contemporary installation art accounts in part for the appeal of "Forty-Part Motet."

By including the initial banter and coughing fits of the choristers, Cardiff lets us in on the transformation that the singers make from ordinary, frail people into vessels of harmonious noise.

The work gently pummels you with sound into a general state of receptivity. In this condition, it's

advisable to march directly up to the museum's top floor, filled with the Cezannes, Picassos and Mondrians that kick-started the modern and contemporary canon, which Cardiff joins.

"Forty-Part Motet," part of MoMA's "Take Two. Worlds and Views: Contemporary Art from the Collection," is up through March 21 at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 W. 53rd St., New York. For information, see <http://www.moma.org>.

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http://www.bbc.co.uk/nottingham/entertainment/artsandliterature/2001_10/nowfest_janet_cardiff.shtml

3rd November 2001 – Nottingham

The NOW festival - Janet Cardiff's 'forty part motet'

A gallery filled with three dozen speakers - each one belting out a single voice which combines to make a magnificent choral performance - We just had to send someone along to check it out.

Janet Cardiff's award winning 'forty part motet' is an emotional and spine tingling piece.

Review by Louise Baker.

The installation consists of forty speakers, each emitting an individual voice from the choir as they sing 'Spem in Alium' by the Elizabethan composer Thomas Tallis. The speakers are grouped around the magnificent space at the Future-Peace centre on Russell street, and as a visitor to the piece you walk amongst the music in the most adept surroundings.

The piece is a hauntingly, beautiful and unique event, as it allows you to walk amongst the choir and become cloaked in the experience. It allows for a wholly original approach rather than being positioned in the slightly colder, less intimate environment of the traditional audience positioning, that of being sat in front of the performance.

The visitors to the installation last Sunday were full of admiration and praise. Considering the piece of music lasts fifteen minutes each time it plays (which is continuous over the whole six hour period), many stayed for two, three and even four repeats, working their way between voices and building up to the crescendo of the experience by standing in the centre and allowing themselves to be lost within Tallis's piece.

'Forty Part Motet' really is something for the soul. Situated in a wonderful, imposing building it has the perfect environment in which to take you wherever you choose to go.

About the composer and his music

<http://www.medieval.org/emfaq/composers/tallis.html>

One of Tallis' most famous compositions, the 40-voice *Spem in alium*, also alludes to a strong allegiance to Roman Catholicism, with its mix of voices both polyphonic and chordal. *Spem* is also a work with an interesting history in its own right. It was ostensibly the result of a challenge by one of the composer's supporters, the Catholic Thomas Howard, fourth Duke of Norfolk (executed not long after as the result of trumped-up charges accusing Norfolk of colluding with Mary Queen of Scots). The work challenged was Striggio's 40-part *Ecce beatum lautam*; the challenge was for an Englishman to produce a work that would excel this piece produced by an Italian. Tallis answered the challenge, perhaps to defend England's creative honour; or to prove himself as an old man still capable of creating great work; or to produce - like many composers - a masterwork which history would remember him by. At any rate, Tallis set to work answering Howard's challenge. And answer it he did: Apparently after its first performance at the palace of Nonsuch (or the Long Hall), owned by Henry Fitzalan, 12th Earl of Arundel, *Spem in alium* moved Thomas Howard enough to remove a heavy gold chain from around his neck, placing it around Tallis' own, thanking the older Thomas for the glorious piece he had crafted.