

interview with Janet Cardiff (JC) and George Bures Miller (GM) and Jacqueline Grandjean (JG)

JG: We started thinking already in 2014, of possible ways to make a project together in the Oude Kerk. The challenge was of course to make a site-specific work. What was your strategy for making a new work in the Oude Kerk?

JC: we visited a couple times and we had *lots* of ideas. Even some ideas, when we saw what had been done there, we thought, “*hmm* we were thinking about mirrors as well” (red: like Marinus Boezem, 2016) We were responding to the space first. Then we thought maybe it will be great to have a video walk there, but it's so sparsely populated that we didn't think it would work so well for that, and maybe it's not using the opportunity. We thought of a big surround sound music piece too, like Murder of Crows, but then GM started getting very interested in this mellotron idea.

GM: When you're working in a big space like that you try and think of a piece that won't try and compete with it. The space is so beautiful already it doesn't need visuals; the visuals are there, they're inherent already. It seemed to make sense to do something that was just-sound and then the idea developed. We were thinking of a surround piece like what we did in Kassel in the forest (“Forest (for a thousand years)”), like going out of that, but then, I'm not sure where we got the idea for the mellotron. I guess we had done this piece already called Poetry Machine (red. An interactive installation with poetry and voice of Leonard Cohen, 2017) - that was the first time we used an organ. We thought to do a piece that uses the same idea as the keys but with the surround sound and the Oude Kerk seemed like the perfect, historically loaded place for that.



FOREST (for a thousand years...), 2012 audio installation: 22 loud speakers mounted in a forest setting, amplifiers, playback computer

JG: how did the title of the work come in?

GM: I love the title, *The Instrument of Troubled Dreams*. It was our working title. We kept saying, we cannot use this as our title, we need to find a better one.

JC: And then I was memorizing words with poetry and one of it was about ideal dreams. And then I was thinking, ideal dreams, what instrument of ideal dreams? And then we were thinking, maybe it's more troubled dreams.

GM: It's much more troubled than ideal.

JG: But it is poetry all together.

JC: poetry is actually a big thing in all of our work. The thing we put things together. The fragmentation, the rhythm, I guess you can say that about abstract film making too. It's like putting

poetry lines together. You have to have the memory from remembering the one segment to the next segment and how it goes together. It has to sink right. Create this magic.

JG: You leave meaning up to the visitor. The visitor is in the driving seat of the installation.

JC: I think it relates to a lot of the other work in that way, in that even a work that I did in 1990 called “Whispering Room.” It was 16 various speakers and out of each speaker came a woman's voice. There were 3 women's voices and they were telling a simple story about a woman leaving her house and walking down the street but all from different points of view. So that was all about the viewer choosing which way they went to create a story. And I think that and even “To Touch” and “1996.” I think a lot of our work, even the walks it's up to the viewer to really do it. Otherwise the concept of the art piece doesn't exist, unless somebody does it. “To Touch” is a piece with a table and unless someone interacts with the table it just sits there silent. The same thing with “Dark Pool,” if most people walked around, you wouldn't get any of the stories.

GM: This is the most complicated of any of the interactive works because there's 72 keys, and in “To Touch” there were 9 sensors, and “Whispering Room” had 18 speakers or something like that. I think what you can do *inside The Instrument of Troubled Dreams* setting is much more complicated than any other piece. There's just so many different layers that you can get into a sound and with the vocal underneath, it just seems very interesting what you can do.

JC: It's like we're trying to create another forest piece only the viewer decides what happens



JANET CARDIFF *Whispering Room*, 1990. Materials: audio, speakers, projected film loop. Duration: Looped playback of 16 audio tracks of various lengths (from 40 sec. to 3 min.)

JG: With a large part of what one experiences, the brain is filling in the gaps. Sometimes the segments are not connected, but the gap you need to fill in yourself.

GM: That's right. And then we have good viewers and bad viewers. The good viewers are able to do that. And the bad viewers maybe not.

JG: Altogether the work contains a very hard algorithm to grasp because you never know how people are going to behave.

GM: yeah exactly. I guess we're programming it for ourselves mainly and then the way people approach it will be the way they approach it, but it's interesting because for them it's also about discovery. There's this whole testing and listening. It's hard for us to know how the audience will react because we know it so well, but it's nice to see like when Jakob (red: Lekkerkerker, organist and curator of music Oude Kerk) was there he said he'd play for 15 min, we came back 1.5h later and he was still there.

JG: More than 72 different sounds come together in one mellotron. How did you select those sounds or where did they come from?

JC: We had recorded some surround sound already previously, for other pieces and he was trying out to see how it would resonate with the Church. We kept thinking how it would resonate in the church, or how it would sound in the church. I was thinking about climate change and rain and a lot of different countries that are experiencing a lot of different changes with weather and we were having a lot of rain, and it made me think of what happens if the rain didn't stop in Amsterdam. It would be a disaster right? We are meters below sea level here. It was also inspired by a I read years ago, *Ice*, by Anna Kavan written in 1967, about London, it was raining and then the whole city being flooded, so you start thinking about the canals too and how the water would come up the canals. So we were writing according to the sounds, but then the writing gave us ideas for sounds.

GM: Of The script was much more detailed about this whole story and we pared it down so that it would be more subtle. You can still read into it, and a lot of people still think it's the past that she's describing. We wanted it to be - it could be the past, it could be the future, it could be now, like a scene of a refugee boat that's going to sink. It flows through all those, because the church has been far in the past and it will go far into the future, so the church is the constant that will always be there, so we wanted to work with that idea. A lot of our work always does that: shifting realities between past, present, and future. I think that's the kind of narrative we like to play with.

JG: your work often relies on technique, and you are not afraid of using out dated techniques or failed technique.

GM: with the surround sound: we're using an old technique, it's called Ambisonic. It was invented by an English mathematician in the 70s, Michael Dourson. It was a failed commercial idea, basically one microphone could capture a sphere of sound as opposed to a circle of sound, normally they call it a periphany when they have height info. We started using this in about 2002, and we just love this idea of a full sphere of sound and capturing a sound. The full sound environment you're in and being able to replay that in another space. So that was really important to us: that this piece was all surround sound. When you press a key you're taken to that environment. And some of it is recorded in the church, some of it is elsewhere, but the idea is that you really get this sense of reality around you.

JG: You created almost a perfect balance between abstraction, filmic tactility, and narrative. Nonetheless, the viewer is in the driver's seat and the work only exists when the viewer/visitor is playing. But is the viewer playing the mellotron or the instrument of troubled dreams?

GM: well it's not a mellotron anymore really. The piece exists only when someone is playing. I mean, we loved the idea conceptually of the mellotron because of the history of where it came from. A mellotron was a somewhat failed, but somewhat successful piece of musical equipment from the 60s, invented by an american named Chamberlain and then taken to the UK and made in the UK 62-63. It's a tape machine, where each note has a physical tape player inside so the thing would weight about a 1000 lbs. So you pressed the key and they would have recorded the G note of a cello, say, and you get the G note, and you move up and get the next note, but it's recorded itself.

I was always fascinated with this machine because I love old analogue stuff and I love mechanical stuff and anybody who would have the craziest idea to do this kind of machine seems interesting. Visually it's also a very interesting device, it has the 2 keyboards split by a little wood in the middle, so we really wanted to stick to that, the look. And it's a specific look: it's the mellotron mark 2 made in 1963 or 64 so we recreated that in our studio. The head of our team, Marijke, built it up and did an amazing job of recreating it. No one who owns a mellotron would think that it wasn't a mellotron. Anyway, so the whole idea for us was you have this mellotron and it plays back these samples. And the BBC took the idea, they had 5 or 6 mellotrons and they used them for sound effects. The whole keyboard was set up so you have gunshots, doors opening, etc, so for radio you just had one guy sitting there and he could play whatever needed to be played. The machine upset the musicians' unions in the UK because they thought they would all be out of a job if one person can sit there and play the cello and a symphony, the French horn, then "how are we going to have a job?" So it's a fascinating cultural thing because this is what happened completely in our societies. So much has changed and this is one of the first machines that was taking over the jobs that a lot of people would do. And one person now could do it.

So anyway, I was fascinated by that. and the idea that we could build our own mellotron but then we'd make it a surround sound device. It would be like the BBC sound effects machines, but it would be completely almost like a reality-creating machine. You press a button and you have the whole sound of that world where the microphone recorded the sound. Then you can overlap different places: we have sound recordings in Kathmandu, you can overlap Kathmandu with out in the middle of nowhere where we live, and with Amsterdam.

JG: how are you working together as a team?

GM: we work differently in every show. We know what we like to do. And part of the whole thing is the discussion of what the piece is gonna be at the beginning, what we want to work on. And then once we decided on this piece the idea. I mean it was clear that I had to do the programming. So I just went in that. I also tried to hire it out, but it didn't work out. Titus did some programming to try, but we are not using it.

JC: In the studio it takes quite a while to get the sounds into the programme. So every few days I might come into the studio where he was working. And he would show me what he put in. Some of the stuff wasn't working. Because we were trying different types of music and different things. So George was managing most of the project. But then if there would be a next step, I would come in and we would talk about it. In that way it's great to have a fresh pair of eyes.

GM: When did we come up with the idea of the narrative? It was in the early stage we said maybe we need to have a story? Or didn't we even say that? I cannot remember. But we were pretty happy when we did the first recordings of the voice. It gives you a little bit more of an emotional buzz. Janet her voice is super special.

JG: to come to the visual aspect of the work; people hardly perceive the installation. When you come into the choir it totally blends in. Still there's a strong visual aspect but it's working in another way. Could you explain how you see the visual part of your work?

GM: It was really tough to site the piece first-off, in the building. We had an idea of the sphere of speakers but where to put it - the choir we felt was a bit too small at first. There was one trip I came, I set the speakers in one location and then moved them up into the choir and that's when we figured out the choir was the best place to be. But then visually we wanted it not to compete with the church, to fit in with the church. Like the last installation by Giorgio Andreotta Calò with the red windows, that's not competing, it's using the church completely but it's fully engaging it on its own kind of enormity. So we were more like let's go with simplicity, keep it small, and try to be almost invisible, and use the sound to engage and envision the church. So the sound is big, hopefully, and the piece, visually, is not.

The sculptural quality of the work is existing when you listen to the sounds. It is a strong call to your imagination. Images occur in your head. Is that an individual kind of way of listening or do you see it as a collective one as well?

JC: I think it's very accurate to who ever is listening. It's both, it's individual and collective, but one of the things is that a sailor listening to the sound of the waves and the sails even knows which sails are flapping. And that will take them in a different time and space. Memory does the same sort of thing. It takes you into a round that has its own unique sense of time. And you can lose five minutes just thinking about something or remembering something. Sound works the same way.

GM: Actually, being comfortable, playing in front of an audience. This is something we don't have experience with for this piece. Will visitors be able to feel comfortable sitting there. I mean for me I think there is probably a more powerful experience if you are the individual and you are sitting alone in a dark church at night, playing the piece by yourself which you will be able to do. I was doing it at my studio at home alone in the dark and it's just so, the sounds change in the dark. They become more visual.

JG: in the installation, we shift between fact and fiction, and reality, projections of fantasy, personal desire and these are of course elements you could also see in former installations. What would you like the visitors to take home? Because he is perceiving or listening to the work, or playing the installation himself. Is there any idea of how he will return?

JC: Well, I've been thinking a lot about how when people go to symphony halls and they listen to music, what would they take home with them. And it's the same kind of thing when they go to anything that's cultural or art. They go or come into this church and then they will see our piece. So, it's a different situation than a regular art gallery. But then I think it seems more special and the sounds they will take home, hopefully it's a bit of magic. Like it's that element of why do you even go interact with something or why do you search for something and it's [scripted?] magic within yourself and this sense of odd that you can take home with you. And this sense of place and memory through the sound. So, I hope it makes them think, it makes them be amazed and that they take experience home like that.

GM: I just like to get people an emotional reaction. To me it's like if you get that tinkle up and down your spine when you are doing something. Or when you are playing maybe a certain sound or mixing two, or three, or four sounds together, you get that kind of moment of like Janet said magic or moment of emotional residence. I am always hoping to achieve this of people, have some kind of connection.