ART PRACTICAL



Bad at Sports

Interview with Janet Cardiff

By Bad at Sports, Patricia Maloney

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Bad At Sports is a weekly podcast about contemporary art. Founded in 2005, the series focuses on presenting the practices of artists, curators, critics, dealers, various other arts professionals through an online audio format.

Having experienced Janet Cardiff's *Forty Part Motet* on several different occasions, I have developed a strong preference for positioning myself with my back to one of the silent speakers at the beginning of the piece. The piece is composed of forty speakers arranged in eight groups of five, configured as a large oval facing each other in the center of the room, and resting on stands so they are roughly just above eye level. The *Motet,* as Cardiff referred to it in our conversation, is a reworking of the English composer Thomas Tallis's *Spem in Alium* (1570), which translates as "Hope in Any Other" and is sung in Latin by a choir of forty voices. The composition is arranged so that the choir, like the speakers, is divided into eight groups of five singers; each group consists of a soprano, tenor, alto, baritone, and bass. The groups alternate singing: first one,

than another, sometimes alone, and at a few moments, all together, rising in a crescendo that breaks open the room to a place beyond the physical world.

To hear the *Motet* in its entirety is profound, and there is no preferential way to experience it. Visitors sit or stand in the center, walk around inside or outside the perimeter, close their eyes or watch one another, follow the choirs across the room, or, as I do, pick a speaker and wait. If I have positioned myself as desired, the ethereal voice of a young male soprano, heartbreaking in its clarity, rings out from behind my head into the space and leaves me shattered in its wake. *Spem in Alium* is considered one of the greatest works of English music. *The Forty Part Motet* is equally a contemporary masterwork. It was a privilege, then, to sit down with Cardiff on November 12, 2015, to speak about her practice. What follows is an abridged version of the conversation. The full conversation will be available as an upcoming podcast episode of *Bad at Sports*.

Patricia Maloney: The installation of the *Forty Part Motet* at Fort Mason is very different from any place I've seen it before. I first saw it at PS1 in 2002, which was also my introduction to your work, and then more recently at the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art. Here, it's not installed in a minimal, white-wall gallery; instead, it is open to the landscape. Today is perhaps the most gloriously clear day of the year, and as I am listening to the work, I am looking through the masts of docked sailboats in the Marina to the Golden Gate Bridge and the Pacific Ocean beyond. Hearing these voices in a specific place changes the work dramatically for me. I was curious if that is also the case for you.

Janet Cardiff: Every place the *Motet* is installed is completely different because of the surroundings. Definitely this space, because you're looking out and you see cars going by, and you see the boat masts waving, the music becomes a film soundtrack at times. It gives the work a different interpretation because of the emotive quality of looking at people hurrying back and forth on the highway or the slow moving of the masts. Every context creates a different response emotionally for the piece.



Janet Cardiff. *The Forty Part Motet*. 2001; installation view, Gallery 308, Fort Mason Center for Arts & Culture, 2015. Pictured: George Bures Miller. Courtesy of Art Hound. Photo: Geneva Anderson.

PM: And how do you approach the context when you are installing the piece? Are there certain things that you need to anticipate beyond the sonic qualities of the space?

JC: The piece has been shown in at least fifty places all over the world. We have criteria for what works and what doesn't. We know there shouldn't be any carpet in the space; we know that a type of clear glass wall is difficult, or what space is difficult, or what room sizes are best for the piece acoustically. Then I also have a Tonmeister from Germany who visits the spaces and listens to them, because some reverberate too much for it. The piece was recorded in a very dry space with the whole choir there, and everybody singularly mic'ed. So the voices are actually quite dry, and if *Motet* is in a space with, say, all wood or carpet, it wouldn't sound very good. Music is designed to be in a space that has a little bit of reverberation, and you can hear the bass and you can hear the treble, and there aren’t too many hard surfaces. A ceiling that's high, like this is, is best, because acoustically the sound waves can move all over the place, and it just gives the music a little more potency.

PM: How did you conceive of the work?

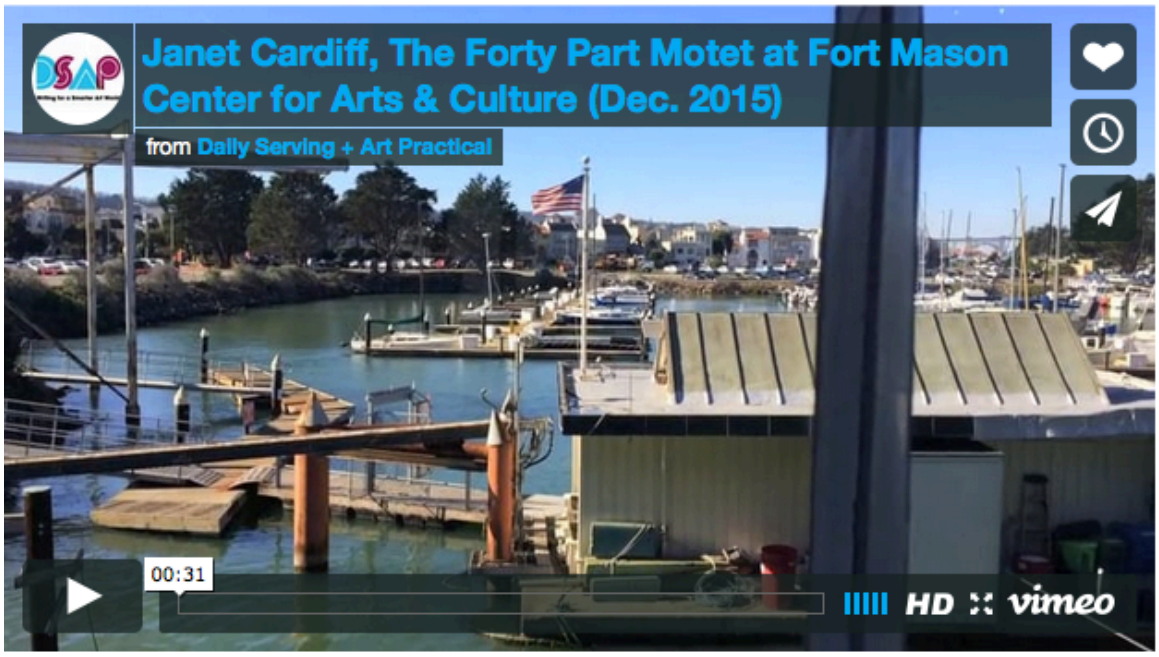
JC: I conceived the work very quickly actually, because I was given a CD by a singer in London, England, where I was recording, and she recognized that I loved three-dimensional sound. When I got home and played it on the CD player, I realized that this piece was a forty-part harmony, but you could only hear two speakers, and it was mush to me. It was really frustrating, because I wanted to actually step right inside the music and really see it around me.

So sometimes things happen and everything works out, because just after that, a producer from England invited me to do a piece, and I said, “Well, I have this idea; I don't know if you can produce this, I've never done a big music piece like this before.” But she hired the choir, and my partner, George [Bures Miller], who I work with, figured out the technology, and affordable technology to produce it had just come out. Then I was invited to show in a particular space at the National Gallery in Ottawa, and it was a room that was perfect for it. So I think some pieces are just meant to be.

PM: Could you talk more about that idea of seeing the music in space? That description is such a great way to encapsulate one's experience of it.

JC: My main interest in sound is how it surrounds us and influences us. It's invisible, comes into our body, but it hits us in a very three-dimensional way. If you look at the score, it's fascinating. There are eight different choirs, and within each choir there's a bass, baritone, alto, tenor, and soprano. You can see the score moving from left to right down the page from one choir to another, to another, and then they group together. When I saw that, I thought that it would be really amazing to show how the composer was thinking about it. When you walk into the space, you're surrounded with this movement of the music from one choir to another choir, and then it jumps across the room to another choir. At some points, it comes in waves, and it ripples, almost like the ripples in a river. It was like the composer was a sculptor, and I wanted to show how sculptural the piece of music was.

PM: *The Forty Part Motet* is very different than the audio walks that you were creating at the time, the major difference being that the *Motet* is a shared experience of the sound, whereas the walks relied on the intimacy of an individual traversing space with your voice in their ears.



View of Fort Mason Marina from Gallery 308, Fort Mason Center for Arts & Culture. Sound from Janet Cardiff, *The Forty Part Motet*, 2015. Video: Patricia Maloney.

JC: This piece is preceded by two other sound installations. One was an old carpenter's table; there were sixteen speakers around the room, and there were hidden sensors in the table. When a viewer touched a sensor, one of the speakers would come on. It was about creating a sound collage, almost a filmic audio score that was just sound. The second piece, the *Whispering Room* (1991), is a direct precedent for the *Forty Part Motet*. It was designed so that as the viewer walked through the space, they heard three different women tell this narrative of a very simple episode in a woman's life from the perspectives of the present, past, and possible future. It was so much about the way that a story could be unveiled.

When it came to the *Motet,* I had the idea that it's never the same piece of music for anyone because of where they're standing in the room or when they enter the piece. I really like that listeners can come into the space and almost unveil the piece of music for themselves by how they walk around the room.

They are aware of other people in the space, but it's almost like being in a dream state. The music slows you down, and you see people walking in the space, and then all of a sudden their footsteps start slowing, and then their face goes into this almost unconscious state. It is like having an audience because you are in the center of the music, but you're very much on your own in there, coping with your own emotions.

PM: Do you think of it as a spiritual piece?

JC: Oh, definitely. The piece of music was written in that context. Everybody's spirituality is different, but the way Tallis composed it, there is a sense of connection with our sort of essential beings. We're able to see the beauty in this invisible medium and in this composition. I think that's a spiritual experience.

PM: In contemporary art, there are very few taboos, but religion remains one of them. We don't aspire to that kind of iconography anymore and don't talk about our experiences in the context of religious experiences. But it was very evident that people were both present—in communion—with everyone else in the room, yet at the same time introspective. That hovers on being a church-like experience. What's so interesting is that one doesn't feel the sense of rupture with this work that we might associate with breaking a taboo. I wonder if there's intention for you in that?

JC: I think there are several taboos in the art world, and one of them is emotionality, but another one is theatricality. And the strange thing with George and I, we've been collaborating for a long time, but some of our work, like *Motet*, is minimalist, and others are almost baroque and very theatrical with the amount of stuff that's in the pieces. Sometimes I get disconcerted with the whole art world and think, “Why does it all matter?” but then I experience a showing of *Motet*. I feel almost renewed again, and think, “Yes, what I'm doing is actually relevant.”

You know, you have artist insecurities and then you realize that there is communication there. It does matter to people. I'm a fan of a lot of art, but with so much other art I just think, “Why are you making that? Is it just for money?” There's got to be another reason. For me, it's always about pushing my edge or pushing my concepts about what reality is and what perception is. The *Forty Part Motet* actually taught George and I a lot about presence and absence. How a voice becomes so anthropomorphic. When you have a speaker there and you feel the presence of the person because of the voice.

PM: We enter as viewers or listeners into these spaces that are evocative and emotional and theatrical and playful so readily. When you are creating these works, do you think about how people will enter into them?



Janet Cardiff. *The Forty Part Motet*. 2001; installation view, Gallery 308, Fort Mason Center for Arts & Culture, 2015; Courtesy of Fort Mason Center for Arts & Culture, San Francisco, and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Photo: Patricia Maloney

JC: I'm realizing that—after doing work over twenty years—that you need the audience to feel included in the piece in some sort of way, whether it's having the sound move around them or the space of the sound. For example, in *Forest (For a Thousand Years...)* (2012) from Documenta, you never know what's real. You feel the forest underneath you, but then you feel it all around you, and you don't know if it's a real tree falling or if it's on the audio track.

That sort of thing is what took me away from working with printmaking. I was always trying to create a filmic involvement in the flat works that I used to make, but I was always frustrated. As soon as I started working in audio, I realized that it has this kind of linear memory. It involves you, it takes you along like you're on a boat in a river or something like that, and you don't quite remember what you saw or heard in the last thirty seconds, but it enters into your subconscious in a way that reality does as well.

PM: How important a role does memory play in your work?

JC: Memory is quite essential, especially in the audio walks and video walks—actually more in the audio walks than the video walks. First of all, you have to listen to what's being said at the beginning of the walk, and that is sort of a nonexistent skill for many people right now; they're losing their listening skills and attention span.

I attempt to write scripts that use more universal memories as well as personal or intimate memories, and then people put them all together. After they come out of the audio walks, it's almost like they've been in a dream. It's the kind of memory that flips from one thing to the other. The physical connection with the environment that the audio walks and the video walks have is so important. What I say on the soundtracks has to resonate with the actual site. As I walk the sites, I read the script and realize the lines that don't do anything for it. They worked in my studio when I was writing them, but they don't do anything when I'm in this concrete area.

When we're editing the soundtracks, we're always shifting them around because the timing has to be right. It's a very three-dimensional way of writing and recording and making these little mini stage plays that are like films for the real world. It's similar to the way that poets put together lines, I think; one resonates with the next one, with the next one. I'm not a poet, but that's what I understand when I'm reading poetry. There has to be this magic between one section and another so that you remember what you just read but also experience this subconscious resonance.

PM: Do you construct the walk to respond to the resonance of one line connecting to the other? Or are the walks laid out first? What is the construction process so that the spaces align with the continuity of one thought and another?

JC: It's like putting a film together, actually, very similar to script writing and filmmaking. It's physical; it's three-dimensional.

We found that the best process is to first wander around an area and see what the best route is. And everyone knows subconsciously that their environment affects them. So when we're designing a walk, we make sure we have places that are narrow to go through, and then, suddenly, expanses. The ending has to almost always have an expanse of place so that one gets this sense of denouement physically. I compare it to a drawing because you need textures, darks and lights, and a line as you're wandering around. Architects must think about this when they're designing buildings because the physical body gets affected.

When I'm writing, I wander around and record what I'm thinking about as I walk by. I might say, “Oh, there are tons of red cars on this street; why is that?” Then it might show up in the script that there's a red car there. And when people are

experiencing the piece, they see a red car and they think, “What? How does she know that?”

So I go through the script-writing process, then we record, then we edit, and we test it on site. That’s when we realize that one section is really dull or it's not working, or it's too long and one can’t remember what happened five minutes ago. Somehow you have to repeat the thought that connects to the last one.



Excerpt from Janet Cardiff. *The Forty Part Motet*. 2001. Courtesy of Fort Mason Center for Arts & Culture, San Francisco and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

PM: It seems so important that the totality of the work be held by the person, so even as they're traversing space, they have a sense of its wholeness. There is, then, a correspondence with *Motet*; even as you position yourself in front of a single speaker, and you have a single voice in your ear, you also have the whole work.

JC: That comment makes me realize how close the audio walks are to *Motet*, because one thing that attracted me to creating the audio walks was creating a surrogate relationship with a viewer, one that was very comfortable and a very safe one for me. People could get this intimate connection with this virtual person in the audio walks, in the same way they can with *Motet*. It’s also important that they hear the footsteps, because then they start walking with the sound of the footsteps. They hear the sound of my breathing; it's right at the back of their

necks, but not in a creepy way. It's almost in a natural way; it's almost in their head. And I talk as if I'm just thinking. It's a thinking voice, not an active voice. So there is a surreal connection to have the transfer of the person into the technology.

I'm not quite sure why that's interesting, but I think it's about basic human communication that I really enjoy with the art works. We are alone, and once we leave our mother's womb, we are alone, and we can never get that back. So somehow, technology has been a way to work with this question of how we deal with being alone yet have connections with other people. That's so romantic, isn't it! Romance is also something that's taboo in the art world.

PM: You just alluded to the substitute relationships the technology creates, and yet, we have all of these ambivalences about these technologies that actually facilitate our communication. In the *Forty Part Motet*, the speakers are very much in evidence, but they're also anthropomorphized because of their height and positioning. How do you think about deflecting the apprehensions of the technologies that produce the sound?

JC: I actually disagree that there is apprehension. People are so involved with technology now they feel like it is part of their living room. Speakers are a part of their living room; iPods are a part of their life, almost a part of their body. When we first started doing the audio walks, there was a lot of discussion about how Walkmans isolated people, but I had so many people who did the audio walks tell me how they felt so much more connected with the environment. It was actually the opposite of what everybody was saying, and a clue that technology is not necessarily alienating. Actually, we feel very connected to it and very comfortable with it.

PM: You accomplish something that is so difficult to accomplish, which is this intimacy in a public experience. Viewing art is a public experience; we do it in the presence of others, yet each person does have this singular experience with the work, and even an intimate experience with the work.

I think about the intimacy of the voice at the back of the neck and how approximate these voices are to us, as if in our own physical being. In my experiences of *Motet,* I've always liked to position myself with my back to one particular speaker and have the voice come from behind.



Janet Cardiff. *The Forty Part Motet*. 2001; installation view, Gallery 308, Fort Mason Center for Arts & Culture, 2015; Courtesy of Fort Mason Center for Arts & Culture, San Francisco, and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Photo: JKA Photography.

JC: There's actually a technical reason for that. Even if we record something in front of us with this bi-aural audio technique I use, we don't see it as in front of us because we use our eyes to position things. If we don't see it in front of us, we hear it from behind. It was very deliberate to have it right at the back, and it was after experiments that we realized it is a very nice place to have this voice because it becomes intimate and it goes into your head.

The Forty Part Motet is on view at Fort Mason Center for Arts and Culture, in San Francisco, through January 18, 2016; it is co-presented by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Janet Cardiff lives in British Columbia, where she works in collaboration with her partner George Bures Miller. The artist is internationally recognized for immersive multimedia works that create transcendent multisensory experiences and draw the viewer into often unsettling narratives. Cardiff and Miller's work has been included in recent group exhibitions and biennales such as *Soundscapes* at the National Gallery, London, the 19th Biennale of Sydney in 2014, and dOCUMENTA (13). Representing Canada at the 2001 Venice Biennale, Cardiff and Miller received the Biennale's Premio Prize and Benesse Prize. Recently, the artists debuted new site-specific commissions for Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris, the Menil Collection, Houston, TX, and the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, Spain.