

THE KILLING MACHINE



This essay is about Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller's Killing Machine, a multi media Art installation first shown in 2007. The essay will explore the work and its various creators, analyse it through research, and put it into context both historically and within the present day. The essay will conclude with a critique of the piece and overall evaluation of its relevance to the possible future of contemporary installation Art in the gallery, Sound art and politically conceived work in general. Within this essay I will also be giving evidence through research to ask the question, why, in a world where we are so subscribed to sensation and have the tools and techniques to deliver such a thing, do we still feel the need to add concept to such works as 'The Killing machine' and seek meaning other than that of the purely experiential?

Contemporary philosopher Robin Mackay sums up my feelings in an essay he wrote for the album released by Florian Hecker entitled 'Acid in the style of David Tudor'. Although this is a long quote I believe it to be necessary as here he makes a case that is central to the theme of my essay.

"The normative myth of the 'adequately sensitive, adequately informed spectator' able to read a work of art 'correctly' is exploded into a multiplicity of different historically situated image-world relations. Does this prevent us from setting the boundary conditions for a 'competent' reading, consigning us to relativity and the impossibility of any critical discourse on what a picture or a sound is 'of'? Not, suggest Art and Language, if we admit that representational ofness. For then criticism would be re-grounded in the ability to detect and analyse the genetic bases of the work, and realism in techniques that clearly circumscribe the relation of the work to its genesis. Accordingly, against the notion that the 'meaning' of a work can be read off its iconic content, the suppression of information about the generation of work would only block access to a full sense of what it is 'of', in what Art and Language argue is ultimately an ideological obfuscation." Mackay, Robin (2009)

The Killing Machine is an installation work by the pair Janett Cardiff and George Bures Miller. The piece is said to have been conceived by two main influences, one, Franz Kafka's short story 'The penal colony' (1919) where prisoners are strapped to a chair and have their sentences inscribed on their backs by needles, and two by the capital punishment system in the United States. One of the key issues of this critique has been to analyse the validity of its concepts. In the case of the reference to capital punishment it seems that Cardiff Miller have suffered from this, as the enormity and complexity of the political subject in this case seems to dwarf the viewer and detracts from the other parts of its conception. For example, Dasgupta in an essay on 'Framing the soldier in an indeterminate war' describes how Ranciere's project separates sense (understanding) from sense (experience) and:

"In his essay "The Intolerable Image," Rancière argues that the image is "not a duplicate of a thing. It is a complex set of relations between the visible and the invisible, the visible and speech, the said and the unsaid" (2011)

Art critic Adrian Searle feels similarly about 'The killing Machine' in a review he did for the Guardian. He also recognises the piece mainly for its context to capital punishment that features in the programme notes. He takes notice that "No one is even mildly appalled. We've seen and heard too much for this to touch us. Show us how waterboarding works". The elephant in the room is too big to ignore and one that the piece possibly would have been successful without its involvement. Adrian Searle then speaks of the pairs work in general stating, "Even though there is much to like about Cardiff and Miller's work - its layering's of fiction; its plays on time and space, place and situation; its technical sophistication - it frequently misses the mark, or is so overegged as to make us not care very much about it. At their worst, Cardiff and Miller just do too much, and direct the spectator too much". This directly relates to what Robin Mackay and Ranciere have suggested and supports an argument

that the work is contrived in a way that it is out of balance with itself within the context of an ideological 'work of art'.

When experiencing the machine there is a dentist chair surrounded by megaphones and robotic arms. To witness 'The Killing Machine' it has an important significant major temporal aspect similar to record that lasts a certain duration and will play the same way each time you chose to hear it. To activate 'The Killing Machine' you are invited to press a big red button, one you might find in a factory. Involving the viewer by utilizing the button invites them to take on the responsibility of what then in suits. The piece unfolds accompanied by music and automated happenings such as a guitar being bashed by a drumstick and a voice reading some text. The piece is loud and bombastic with a disco ball and pink fluffy material covering the seat in which the prisoner might have sat.

As the following description is found on the Artists website and also in their catalogue from Darmstadt institute 2007 it reveals how important this 'understanding' is to their work:

"Partly inspired by Franz Kafka's 'In the Penal Colony' and partly by the American system of capital punishment as well as the current political situation, the piece is an ironic approach to killing and torture machines...in our culture right now there is a strange deliberate and indifferent approach to killing. I think that our interest in creating this piece comes from a response to that." (Cardiff and Miller 2007)

This is a situation where the 'Art' should have been left between the work and the viewer and not transcribed in a short paragraph under an image of the piece, if we are to follow Ranciere's argument related to the intolerable image.

Franz Kafka was a Jewish fictional writer from Prague working in the early 20th century. He is described as one of the greatest fictional writers of all

time by some and has been a source of inspiration for many creatives since his death in 1924. Kafka's short story 'The penal colony' has been referenced in 'The Killing Machine'. In this short story an explorer is visiting a penal colony, there is a commandant that reveals a machine for administering punishment to the prisoners. This machine is described almost exactly how it is portrayed in 'The Killing Machine' except for only a few differences. In this story the prisoners are not told of their crimes and are deemed to realise them through having it inscribed by needles on their backs, which ultimately ends up in the death of the prisoner. The theme of injustice occurs in other Kafka writings most notably 'The Trial' where a man (K) working in a bank is arrested and has to try and prove his innocence. The story ends with the man being executed by two guards who pass the blade back and forth neither willing to do the deed. Eventually his death is brutal and his last words uttered are, "like a dog". It is in the ending of the trial that Kafka questions capital punishment through the eyes of the condemned. He witnesses here that neither guard was willing to commit the execution, and it is here where the immorality of capital punishment is seen to be revealed. It is significant that these story's by Kafka were written in 1919 and 1914 respectively and the current political situation makes them relevant again. All these ideas are brought into relation to this work in the way that Ranciere described as a complex set of relations, here between law, innocence, death and conscience.

Carlo Crovato is technical assistant to Cardiff Miller and assisted with all the robotics for 'the killing machine'. He describes himself as a non-academic visual artist working in natural phenomenon. He says he considers his work to be more accessible to the public because of its lack of theoretical content and is more sensation and athletically based and has shared similar topics in his own work as that of 'the Killing Machine' for instance in a piece titled 'Pop The Grape', a video installation commenting on the United States and their occupancy in Iraq. In this critical political work a soldier tells of confusion resulting in mass civilian casualties and his defection from the armed forces as a result. Future projects of his will involve LED's, train tracks and motion

sensors. Although he described himself as a non-academic artist he does have a section labelled statement on his website with quotes from Descart and Benjamin lee Whorf. The latter stating, “we cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language ... we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification of data which the agreement decrees.” Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897-1941)

Frieda Abtan who also collaborated on ‘The Killing Machine’ is a multi disciplinary artist and composer from Canada. She describes her music as falling in-between the genres of 'music concrete', 'modern noise' and 'experimental audio'. In her work she has developed her sound that consists of techniques derived from music concrete, computer processing and her own voice. The music of hers used in 'The killing machine' titled 'Heartstrings' has been borrowed from a previous performance she had done in 2004 involving a string quartet synched to a video projection. This piece of music to is very filmic purely because of its functionality, violins playing eerie dissonant drones and repeated phrases with lots of trill. The affect of the sound overall is to discomfort the viewer and to promote and increased exertion of emotion whilst watching the machines movements. This affect of dissonant tones upon an audience had been realised long ago and adds to the idea that this piece has a big focus on its experiential success. Anathius Kircher, stated 1650, "Perfectly Harmonious and, in this sense, beautiful music can have powerful healing effects, but only for mental illness, not for physical ailments. Disharmonious sounds have the opposite effect and plunge the soul into turbulence."Kircher 1650, vol.1,p.564 Zeilinski,S,(2008)

Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller are a husband and wife partnership the former being hugely successful and acknowledged for her independent work and the latter fairly un written about before they began working together. His interests lie predominantly in scientific exploration in Art. “Miller's work has

always had the effect of knocking the viewer off balance, and this work is no exception." This was said about his video pieces, this experiential aspect you can see in the pairs collaborations in particular with 'The Killing Machine'.

March 11, 1995 programme notes on George Bures Miller's piece, 'Simple Experiments in Aero dynamics'.

Janet Cardiff on the other hand, was working in the world of anthropology with memory fantasy and fairy tale. Born in Canada in 1957 she then studied at Queens University in 1980's, ' it is then Since 1995 that she has gained an international recognition for her audio and video "walks" in which visitors, while listening to a portable listening device or watching the screen of a camcorder, follow her directions through a chosen site, and become "participants" in her stories. When their two ways of working came together it seemed a very simple equation that had been solved toward creating the work that seems to be so successful for them today.

Although being established artist's and working mainly from arts grants and funding the pair openly admit that their work is an amalgamation of many different influences that could be seen as professions in themselves. "The paradise institute", the pairs most successful work, which won the, 'la biennale di Venezia' award at the Venice Biennale in 2001," was a 16 seat movie theatre where viewers watched a mystery film and became entangled as a witness to a possible crime played out in the audience and on screen." Another work 'The Forty Part Motet' (A reworking of "spem in alium" by Thomas Tallis 1573) seems to be a comment on the future capabilities of enjoying choral music within a gallery type space.

In the following interview Published in the Whitechapel Magazine, June 2003 conducted by Andrea Tarsia the artist's show their feelings about the capability's of technology and how it has an affect on the human psyche.

Q. Do you feel ambivalent about technology's impact on the body ?

Janet Cardiff: No. I love it. I think computers; cell phones and Discmans are about taking us to different worlds. It doesn't dull your senses, it just increases them because you have to experience things in a more multi-dimensional way.

George Bures Miller: I think Janet's walks do explore the dark side of technology. They make you think about so many issues to do with control and reality, with how we are manipulated by the new technologies and the groups that promote them. Jones.A.Caroline (2006)

In the interview (Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller) Cardiff Miller talk about their use of technology as a way to evoke sensation within their works. This is of key interest in much of their work.

This is 'Experiential Art' and it is the experience that governs all decisions on the piece from choosing a concept to installing it in the space. I would argue that the added concept in the case of the Killing machine (being the comment on capital punishment in the states) is added to maybe help compound it as a work suitable for the Gallery and that there is still the need for this aspect to a work to pass it through the admin a give it a place in an institution. This idea of decision making was introduced by Foucault and referred to as *dispositif*. "Agamben also notes that *dispositif* has the legal meaning of the force or finding of a decision; in this regard " apparatus" in English has the key weakness of meaning precisely the opposite namely the "fine print" and the notes, as opposed to the decision and the force of the decision itself. (2010)

Although not referenced by Cardiff Miller there is a rich history to mechanical theatre which could be seen to be a precedent to this type of Sound art installation. Heron of Alexandria , Giovanni Batista Della Porta and Athanasius Kircher all worked within Magic and Science.

In 1601 Giovanni Battista Della Porta published a treatise on the laws of levers and propulsion, their calculation, and applications. The three books that comprise his 'Pneumaticorum' are also wonderful reminiscence of Heron of Alexandria and his mechanical theatre of special effects machines driven by fire, water and steam. (2008) Z.S. Heron was around more than 1000 years prior and was known as 'Mechanikos', the Machine Man, he invented the world's first steam engine and his ideas and practices are regarded to be the bedrock of cybernetics. "But what really stirred Heron's soul were novelties: pneumatic gadgets and magic theatres, one of which rolled itself before the audience on its own power, cranked through a miniature three-dimensional performance, and then made its own exit. Another staged a Dionysian mystery rite with Apollonian precision: Flames leapt, thunder crashed, and miniature female Bacchantes whirled madly around the wine god on a pulley-driven turntable." Lahanas, Michael (2012)

Athanasius Kircher is the most recent of the ancient explorers of Pneumatics, "The acoustic mechanical theatre, which Kircher developed elaborately and had built, belongs to the category of staging spectacular effects."...An exhibition in spring 2001, curated by Eugenio Lo Sardo, attempted to reconstruct parts of the museum at the Palazzo Venezia in Rome (cf. Lo Sardo 2001). Giorgio de Sepibus, who assisted Kircher in building the mechanical artifacts, compiled and published a detailed catalogue of the exhibits (de Sepibus 1678)" This coincidentally was the same year where Cardiff Miller accepted the top prize at the Venice Biennale.

I'd like to start my conclusion with a statement made by Marcel Duchamp at a talk in Philadelphia in 1961 called 'Where do we go from here?'

During the talk, "he denounced the 'enormous dilution' of art and the 'levelling down of present taste, of which the immediate result will be to shroud the near future in mediocrity". He continued to state. "I hope that this mediocrity, conditioned by too many factors foreign to art per se, will this time bring a

revolution on the ascetic level, of which the general public will not even be aware and which only a few initiates will develop on the fringe of a world blinded by economic fireworks. The great artist of tomorrow will go underground.” The great artist Duchamp speaks of in this talk is one that is not governed by Foucault’s dispositif. Art in the gallery is becoming more about the experience at the moment there is a group of artists who experiment in both being ‘conceptual’ and ‘experiential’ at the same time. Whether this is by necessity or by choice this seems to be the only way to get into the institutional spaces at this time. Art should be honest in display of its conception and why Duchamp’s quote is relevant to realising a conclusion to this essay. Through analysing ‘The Killing Machine’ it can be seen that the failure of the piece lies in its attachment to the current political situation in the United States where a balance cannot be found between fantasy and reality. Fantasy being Kafka and reality being capital punishment. By inviting the viewer to witness your work with this contemplation already established how can the viewer experience what the work is there to offer on a purely ‘experiential’ level. Galleries must consider a value to purely ‘experiential’ works.

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