

# The House of Books has no Windows: Prompting Imagination Through Narrative, Heterotopia, and the Found Object

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Currently in her fourth year at Concordia, Sienna MacArthur is a French-American art history student who grew up in Boston. As a member of the Concordia co-op program, she has developed a professional background working at Harvard University, SBC Gallery of Contemporary and America Dural Inc., an interior design firm in Boston. These experiences enhanced her academic interests surrounding the decorative arts, architecture, and contemporary art practices. After graduating, Sienna plans to return to the United States for her masters in interior design and architecture in order to pursue a career in the residential design field.

In 2008, Canadian artists Janet Cardiff and Georges Bures Miller held an exhibition at the Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh, Scotland in which their series of works characterized a new genre distinct from, but not entirely foreign to, the immersive multimedia works they are most known for. *The House of Books Has No Windows* was the first installation in this exhibition and, as such, introduces a premise constructed around narrative, memory, and found objects. By intersecting the familiar with the strange through a literal fusion of literature and architecture, *The House of Books Has No Windows* alludes to notions of the found object, spatialized narrative, and heterotopia activated by the viewer's imagination and curiosity. Assembled literally from a collection of English literature books, the work takes the form of a small cabin-shaped house that sits inside the blank gallery room (Fig. 1). One is able to enter it, yet once inside, they are unable to look out except through the very doorless entry from which they came. Within Cardiff and Miller's extensive portfolio

of works, this particular installation is unique in its very lack of audio or visual media, which ultimately creates a relationship with the viewer void of sensory immersion or guided tour. The work thus reinforces the traditional dynamic between subjective viewer and remote object, while simultaneously eliminating the frame or pedestal from the gallery.

Behind their component placement within the installation, the books themselves are objects that endured their own historical trajectory. The house was constructed with a total of five thousand books that came from different collections all over Scotland and are all English literature writings published in the United Kingdom.<sup>1</sup> Stemming from a chronological origin deeply rooted within the cultural hegemony of England over Scotland, these books fabricate their own livelihood in addition to the stories bound inside them. The historical timeline embedded within these second-hand books, however, was about to come to an end as they were going to be pulped before Cardiff and Miller retrieved them for this installation.<sup>2</sup> In this sense they can be

The House of Books has no  
Windows: Prompting Imagination  
Through Narrative, Heterotopia,  
and the Found Object



174

Fig. 1: Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, *The House of Books Has No Windows*: Installation View, Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, Scotland, 2008. Source: "Installations: The House of Books Has No Windows, 2008," Janet Cardiff George Bures Miller, [http://www.cardiffmiller.com/artworks/inst/house\\_of\\_books.html#](http://www.cardiffmiller.com/artworks/inst/house_of_books.html#)

considered rescued items, objects that have been recovered for further use but of which their original purpose has been completely disabled. The books are no longer meant to be physically read, but are rather transformed into building blocks in order to serve as tools for constructing an entirely new object. The books are thus subject to a practical and conceptual transformation from books to bricks, nomadic items to immovable parts, personal possessions to a collective group.

Despite the physical transformation of the book collection, the viewer is able to recognize the very lack of newness in their used appearance and strong cultural and historical precedence. This recognition is fostered by the notion of the found object that is familiar to the everyday life of an individual, including books. The use of the found object within this installation connects it to historical avant-garde practices in the early twentieth century, almost a full century prior to this 2008 installation. In his readymades, Duchamp would assemble found objects that he came across in his quotidian encounters.<sup>3</sup> Rather

than crafting his sculptures by means of a specific medium, he would simply create strange structures with everyday items familiar to the viewer. The collection of parts to create a whole in Duchamp's contraptions is applicable to *The House of Books Has No Windows* as each individual book was grouped together to create a single structure displayed in the gallery. The structure is ultimately deemed a work of art despite the absence of a specific medium and the artists' lack of involvement in the making process. Unlike Duchamp's direct engagement with the assembly of his readymades, Cardiff and Miller were not even present in the construction of their house, which further distances the artists' agency in order to emphasize the viewer's interpretation.

Margaret Iversen further speculates that the "found object shares with the readymade a lack of obvious aesthetic quality and little intervention on the part

of the artist beyond putting the object in circulation.<sup>4</sup> Cardiff and Miller certainly do not intervene in the placement of these found objects but, unlike the manufactured aesthetic of Duchamp's objects, the unique typography and style of each book coordinate together to create a colorful pattern in the whole, which cannot be replicated in a factory. The unique nature of the found object was further theorized by French writer André Breton who believed in the intrinsic relationship between the psychological mind and the material world with which it engages.<sup>5</sup> The found object belongs somewhere in between these two entities, "situated at the point of connection between external nature, perception, and the unconscious, and thus has a peculiar, elusive relation to vision."<sup>6</sup> In *The House of Books Has No Windows*, the books are perceived as belonging to the external material world and, up until this installation, have a history of circulating within it. Yet in this objective perception, they remain bound in the viewer's psyche as familiar objects associated with storytelling and images. The viewer walks around

and enters the house and, in doing so, subconsciously engages in a personal relationship with a book they may have read or recognize from past encounters. Breton's found object straddles both internal and external domains which in some ways Cardiff and Miller concretize through the metaphor of the house as a private realm placed within a public environment.

The books in this installation are thus embedded within the visual and spatial embodiment of the structure as its walls literally house different stories. The concept of storytelling is a common theme in Cardiff and Miller's body of works, notably in their "walks" in which the viewer is guided around specific locations by a sound recording of Cardiff's voice. In these walks, Cardiff constructs entire scenarios directly relevant to the visual landscape surrounding the viewer. The narrative embedded within the work is performed by means of a sensorial experience that submerges the viewer further into their immediate surroundings. In *The House of Books Has No Windows*, the written versus the told story is abstracted into a mere symbolic

suggestion of a narrative that the viewer is actually incapable of reading since the books are nailed shut. In this sense, narrative can only be identified as an architectural component in which the house represents a literal superimposition of different stories that eventually meet at the apex of the roof. There is thus no need for an auditory recording to guide the viewer around the installation because the house itself embodies the narrative, or rather an assembly of multiple narratives. Since each story is legibly restricted to the viewer, he/she must use his/her own imagination to fabricate a new narrative intrinsic with the architectural nature of the house.

In this sense, the entire house as a whole object unified by component parts imbues its own spatial narrative distinct from those in the individual books. French philosopher, Michel de Certeau distinguishes between place and space: the former being defined as a specific location configured by the coexistence of fixed elements, and the latter being characterized by variants of marked traces and the accumulation of temporal and contextual change.<sup>7</sup> Ac-

ording the Certeau, space can only be activated by movements or conditions attributed to the inert occupants that define place.<sup>8</sup> The role that stories play in this relationship is to “carry out a labor that constantly transforms places into spaces or spaces into places,” therefore constructing a spatial narrative.<sup>9</sup> Certeau speaks about these spatial narratives in terms of geographic and urban settings, but it can be applied through the microcosmic lens of Cardiff and Miller’s house in terms of the viewer’s role in defining the work as a space. Within the predetermined milieu of the art gallery, the installation represents a place that was once non-existent but became a built site determined by its object components. As one explores the house both externally and internally, one transforms the site into a space that is activated by the viewer’s temporal presence. The possibility for more than one individual to

The House of Books has no  
Windows: Prompting Imagination  
Through Narrative, Heterotopia,  
and the Found Object

178



Fig. 2: Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, *The House of Books Has No Windows: Interior View*, Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, Scotland, 2008. Source: "Installations: The House of Books Has No Windows, 2008," Janet Cardiff George Bures Miller, [http://www.cardiffmiller.com/artworks/inst/house\\_of\\_books.html#](http://www.cardiffmiller.com/artworks/inst/house_of_books.html#)

be in the gallery room at the same time enables a network of traces of movement to occur. The viewer ultimately determines the space that the house occupies and without this dynamic, the installation is void of narrative meaning. In this sense, the spatial narrative that is responsible for the interrelationship between the house as place and space is created by the prolonged experience of the viewer.

Furthermore, the strategic placement of the house within a preconceived building reframes the work within broader notions of spatial containment. The traditional linear boundaries between viewer and art object, whether it be a wall hanging or a sculpture, are completely subverted as the artists created a structure within a structure. Due to its interior location, the installation can only be witnessed through the passage of a series of thresholds as they enter the gallery building, then the gallery room, and subsequently the house itself if they are able to fit. This obligatory movement additionally constructs a spatial narrative in which each lieu of passage is activated upon a temporal

sequence of either singular or concurrent encounters. Each encountered space is itself defined not by a linear alignment, but rather by a volumetric layering of structures: a house inside a larger room inside an even larger building. In terms of proportion, each structure is in close proximity to one another as the building contains few rooms and little space is left between the house and the surrounding walls and ceiling. The artwork ultimately remains passive as it awaits the viewer's presence within the confined space of the gallery room.

This institutional setting of *The House of Books Has No Windows* is interesting when considering Cardiff's reputation for creating works that continuously disregard the traditional white walled gallery. She does this by destabilizing the ocular supremacy of viewership through transformative scenarios located both indoors and outdoors.

180 Yet this particular installation cannot be heard or necessarily experienced, thus creating a reliance on sight. This is achieved by the very preservation of the blank white walls in the gallery. The “neutral” gallery space creates a specific condition predicated not so much on elevating the structure as a monument or an invaluable object, but rather emphasizing the visual surface of the textured material walls. The books are not permeable to harsh weather conditions and in this sense, the gallery acts as a shelter preventing the overall structure from disintegrating. Despite the explicit framework of the gallery walls, the work is not glorified and, although it remains physically contained, it is not confined to a single perspective. As Bartomeu Marí observes of her more recent work: “Inside the museum, the participants of the newer installations do not move according to the artists’ orders. Instead, they walk from work to work, from fiction to fiction, within a meta-architecture that has been superimposed on the museum’s galleries.”<sup>10</sup> The gallery space can be seen as a mere backdrop to the installation itself, which enables

the viewer to perceive the work with or without acknowledging its institutional setting.

Moreover, Cardiff and Miller’s conception of a tangible real space that ultimately exists concurrently with the space around it alludes to the French philosopher Michel Foucault’s notion of heterotopia. In contradistinction to utopias, Foucault defines heterotopias as real places formed in society that “are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.”<sup>11</sup> Foucault delineates six different principles underlying the various types of existing heterotopias: that of crisis and deviation, that which juxtaposes multiple incompatible sites within a single site, that link to slices in time, that relate to ritual and purification, and finally that all heterotopias have an inherent relationship to the remaining spaces.<sup>12</sup> The heterotopia can be characterized by a set of dualities or contradictions as it represents a public space that can be encountered yet

not perpetually accessible, a concrete place that has no place of belonging, and a place that exists on its own but that remains integrated within a set of circumstances.<sup>13</sup> In this installation, the house of books represents a functional space in theory but is practically ineffective in its impermanence, disabling any designated potential for living or general use.

*The House of Books Has No Windows* can be considered a heterotopic space through the installation's dual nature as both an enclosed structure and a display open to the public. The absence of an actual door invites the viewer into the house yet upon looking inside, the viewer realizes that it is completely dark due to the lack of windows (Fig. 2). The very title of the work foreshadows this realization, and reinforces the notion that the work can only be visually perceived through external observation. The dark interior both isolates the viewer while the open entry suggests its penetrability. The idea of opening and closing heterotopias is further presupposed by the house's actual size. Measuring about three and a

half feet in height, the structure is not certainly comparable to the scale of a shed, and is thus rendered closer to the form of a large object rather than a house. Its much larger appearance in photographs thus creates a polarity in the work between the real miniature and the captured gigantic, a relationship that permeates into the viewer's experience as he/she feels ironically bigger than the house. In keeping with Foucault's notion of heterotopia, this dynamic between the viewer and the work characterizes a space where social relations associated with the individual's built environment are inverted.

In addition to its proportion, the artists' intention to conceive of a house with no windows and have it displayed completely subverts the traditional notion of the house as a site of accommodation. It can thus be compared to the heterotopia of a folly which developed in the eighteenth century as an architectural

182

construction that seemed to serve no apparent purpose.<sup>14</sup> Although one may manage to enter inside its tiny opening, one would be forced into an uncomfortable crouching position. From an interior perspective, this removes any practical function from the house; yet externally, it evokes a clear relationship with the gallery space around it. This relationship is characterized by an association between the gallery institution and the books. The books make reference to the heterotopia of the library that, along with the museum or gallery, is a space that embodies the accumulation of time. By securing the books within the definite boundaries of the walls and roof, the artists are disabling this accumulation. Yet through a literal layering of time evoked by the stacked books, the artists preserve their memory for the viewer to reflect upon within the given space. In an abstracted sense, then, this installation can be aligned with Cardiff's other media works: it is time-based in evoking memory through layers of cultural history, and is fictional both literally through its use of literature and metaphorically through its curious

effect on the viewer's imagination.<sup>15</sup>

Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller have created a work that at first glance appears to be just a small house, but reveals layers of realities associated with history, architecture, narrative, institution, and imagination. *The House of Books Has No Windows* ultimately offers an escape into other worlds in terms of its literature, as well as its intriguing, yet empty, interior. In both a literal manifestation as well as interpretation, the house suggests that architecture is performed through narrative. Yet this performance can only be activated by the viewer's presence, as one's movements around the installation transform the place into a space. This specific dynamic can be retraced to Janet Cardiff's most known sound walks, despite the installation's absence of media. Yet in some ways, this work seems meant to stand away from Cardiff's other genres because its conception is based on a physical process of making and constructing the house. The books are individually irregular in shape and more malleable than stackable bricks, but ultimately produce a

perceivably immaculate structure when they are collectively organized. Through means of rescue and repurpose, the house is a strange object made up of familiar elements meant for the viewer not to read, but to visually and spatially explore.

13 Ibid., 27.

14 Stefan Jovanovic, "Spaces and Sites of Contemporary Installation," (lecture, art history course, Concordia University, Montreal, QC, September 17, 2015).

15 Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, *Janet Cardiff: A Survey of Works Including Collaborations with George Bures Miller*, (Long Island City, New York: P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, 2001), 15.

## Endnotes

1 *Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, The House of Books Has No Windows at The Fruitmarket Gallery*, Online Video, (Scotland: The Fruitmarket Gallery, 2008.), Film, accessed November 10, 2015, [http://www.cardiffmiller.com/artworks/inst/hobhnw\\_video.html](http://www.cardiffmiller.com/artworks/inst/hobhnw_video.html).

2 Ibid.

3 Margaret Iversen, "Readymade, Found Object, Photograph," *Art Journal* 63, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 47, doi:10.2307/4134520.

4 Ibid., 48.

5 Ibid., 49.

6 Ibid.

7 Michel de Certeau, "Spatial Stories," in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 117.

8 Ibid., 118.

9 Ibid.

10 Bartomeu Mari, "Janet Cardiff, George Bures Miller, and Other Stories," in *Janet Cardiff & George Bures Miller: The Killing Machine and Other Stories 1995-2007*, ed. Ralf Beil and Bartomeu Mari (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2007), 19.

11 Michel Foucault and Jay Miskowicz, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 24, doi:10.2307/464648.

12 Ibid., 24-27.

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184

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