

„Wanås“

Into the Woods: Janet Cardiff's Wanås Walk

Once upon a time, at a castle in Sweden, an artist from Alberta told stories to trees
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by Gary Michael Dault

“You Must Come To Wanås.” The voice on the phone, urgent yet sensible, persuasive yet thoughtful, belongs to Marika Wachtmeister, the director of the Wanas Foundation in Knislinge, in southern Sweden. “You are already coming to Copenhagen,” she points out patiently, “and it is very easy to get to us from there...it’s only about an hour away. You must come to Wanås.”

She is right, of course. I must go to Wanås. I will go to Wanås. The Wanås Foundation, presided over by the undeniable Marika Wachtmeister and her husband, Carl-Gustaf Wachtmeister, a forester by trade and passionate art collector and curator by avocation, is housed in a magical, medieval castle (with attendant barns and a vast art park) in the middle of a dense forest of beech trees right out of Hans Christian Anderson. This past summer’s exhibition, by international artists the foundation has invited to work there, is the ninth at Wanås since 1987, and features, Formley, Allan McCollum, and Roxy Paine, and in particular- the galvanizing reason for my visit - a work by Janet Cardiff, the only Canadian artist in this impressive international lineup.

So, what I think I’ll do, at the risk of offending my Danish hosts, who have invited me to the reopening of a new Statens Museum for Kunst, is to get to Copenhagen go straight from the airport, not to my hotel as planned, but rather to the harbor, there to board, as per Ms. Wachtmeister’s directions, a hydrofoil (the “flygbatarna”) for the short hop to Malmo, Sweden, and from there, be whisked to Wanås by the car that will be sent for me. With any luck, I’ll be back in Copenhagen later that same afternoon, in plenty of time for an official dinner that evening.

That is, of course, not what happened. The trip by flygbatarna is gray, cold and choppy (it’s early November), and takes an hour all by itself. The Wanås Range Rover is late. The motor trip through the darkling Swedish woods takes another hour. By the time I reach Wanås, and am hospitably thawed out by very welcome refreshments from the hearty and magnanimous Carl-Gustaf, the watery light of the brief autumn day is waning. By the time Carl-Gustaf drives me out into the forest to see Abramovic’s extraordinary, primitive The Hunt Chair for Animal Spirits, a towering 40-foot-high steel chair with antlers, and Antony Gormley’s eerie Insiders, a furtive crowd of life-size iron figures so gaunt and attenuated they hardly show up in my snapshots, so wanly do they stand amidst the towering, moss-covered trees, into the sere, so to speak, and I have not yet encountered Janet Cardiff’s work, her Wanås Walk - the principle reason I’m here.

And so Carl-Gustaf hands me a Sony Discman, shows me the On switch, and leads me up to the gate, by the horse barn, where the Cardiff walk is supposed to begin. The Swedish night is veiling down over me like an ink wash. Pretty soon it will be as dark as a Bergman film. “You’ll have time,” Carl-Gustaf assures me, glancing at the enveloping gloom, “The walk is only about ten minutes long” (13.5 minutes actually). I clamp on the earphones. “How will I know where to go?” I asked him, thinking about how all the sinister fairy tales I know begin with a hapless jaunt Into the Wood. “Janet Cardiff will direct you,” he tells me, and, with a happy wave, heads back up the lane to Wanås castle. I am suddenly standing in the quietest place on Earth.

I fit on the headphones. I press Play. I jump out of my skin. The hair stands up on the back of my neck and my scalp prickles. There are birds twittering inside my head. And suddenly, so close she's inside me, the precise but sensuous voice of Janet Cardiff says to me, to us, My mind is full of images from another place and another time. This is so damned lovely and so damned, well, literary, as well as cinematic, your heart opens and applauds the perfect rightness of it, the beauty of being in such good hands, and then a car drives by on the gravel road, just to my right! A thrill of fear. Brief flare of rising anger at the disturbance. You look quickly to the right and...there is nothing. No car. The car is inside your head, too, on the CD. Then you see, Jeez, the whole thing is recorded using the Kunstkopf system! It's a bin-aural audio-recording technique for which two miniature stereo microphones are positioned exactly as far apart as our ears are. The result is 3-D sound so spectacularly realistic it is astounding. Everything is so present, you feel as if your brain were as big as the sonic world you walk through. That acoustic car, for example, almost ran me over.

I need direction and assurance. Cardiff gives it to me. I want you to walk with me, into the forest, she intones from within my mind. Lest I still not get the idea, I hear the sound of footsteps crunching up the gravel path before me. I start off tentatively in the same direction. Go through the main gate and then to the right. Okay, I can do that. I start walking. But how will I know if I'm in the right place at the right time? Cardiff, transcendental flight attendant, has prepared for this very anxiety. Try to walk with the sound of my footsteps so that we can stay together. Gawd this is strange. I don't even know Janet Cardiff and now we're walking together. But not side by side. No, it's more as if she has stepped inside me and the two of us are one single walking, listening, thinking, feeling unit. This is scary and intimate, disturbing and enthralling.

Crunch, crunch, crunch. We walk together past the stable. Horses neigh loudly. I spin around to see them. No horses, of course. Kunstkopf horses. Then there are sounds of people at a picnic table way over to my left, kids laughing in the distance. Somebody coughs loudly just behind my right ear. Yipe! A fly buzzes around my head. I try absently to brush it away. There is no fly. It was maybe last summer's fly. It is a dark, cold, autumn evening; there are no flies now. It's a nice day for a walk...(yeah, well it could be warmer)...This place feels so familiar to me. Like a dream. To me, too. Like a dream I'm having right now. Suddenly, we're walking, according to the sound, on wood chips. I look down. We are, too. It's good to know that I'm keeping pace, that I'm walking with her, at the rate Cardiff has suggested.

Where now?...through the gate. I check. Yup, there's the gate. I go through it. Crunch, crunch, crunch. All at once the voice of an older woman says, in my left ear, The flowers in the garden wilted and died. The stone fence started to crumble. When? Where? So...this isn't just a walk through the present! I'm musing on this when Janet, hitherto curled up inside my brain, suddenly asks me Do you know those moments when the past overlaps with the present, for just an instant? I'm just giving this some thought when she interjects again with directions: Take the little path to the left, not the main one. It's covered with dry leaves. And go to the left of the compost pile. Moment of panic. Fear at going astray. Resolved by the compost pile, yes, there it is. I'm (we're) back on track. Crunch, crunch, crunch.

How many minutes have elapsed? Impossible to say. Coarsely irrelevant to calculate. Time (since there are two times flowing through me now) has become as elastic as the sonic space Cardiff is building. As the disc proceeds to play (in the Discman, in my head), Cardiff's soundworld opens up, builds up a wider and wider spatial world, and peoples it with lyric snatches of narrative, with fragrant, plangent, elegiac shards of stories lying parallel to, weaving contrapuntally into our walk. There is strange singing off somewhere in the forest, high, rapturously beautiful chanting- a female voice, then a male voice in response. I forget myself and pause, enraptured, to listen. Cardiff immediately provides a tender but authoritative corrective to my dalliance: Try to follow the path I've made through the woods. There is the

sound of walking on dead leaves. I scurry to catch up, to fit myself into the rhythm and the spatial pattern of the footfalls until we are one again.

Now the stories come faster, as we walk. Disturbing half-tales of oppression, suffering. It was a long time ago says the older woman, before the wars, before we had to live underground in tunnels. It was one day that defied all the laws of science, a day when the clocks seemed to stand still. Cardiff's comments are now brief, pointed, directorial: A tree leaning against another one. A large stone. Sometimes, when her narratives require it, she will simply say Stop. And you stop, there in the deep woods, a still point about which hover Cardiff's floating stories and the music of her intoxicating alternate nature (an uprush of wings, pheasants flapping in panic up out of the underbrush, a porcupine rustling along behind you).

Other characters enter. From other times. Tell me about your dream, Cardiff asks suddenly, the one you had when you were young. You think she means you. You're just about to not know what to say when a male voice close to your right ear answers her instead:

The soldiers had come to our town and taken everyone away, but my brothers and I had built a room underneath the forest that we could escape to. The door was a secret, a hole cut into a tree. you climbed down a wooden ladder to the tunnels below. we had hooked up a TV camera that we could scan the forest with to make sure it was safe to go out. we had a refrigerator stocked with lots of food and even a ping-pong table...

Then Cardiff adds memories of her own. I found it, she says. This is the place I remember. I used to sit here and daydream. The hole in the tree...These two trees look like they're lovers. You look and, yes, the two trees right ahead of you do look like that. But how did Cardiff's own dreams get into this? You thought she was just the omnipotent narrator, the director of the sound-film. More heart-stopping, sonic pheasants flap up from the undergrowth. There is (for the first time) a soundtrack (scary conventionalized movie music). Has Cardiff been hypnotized by her own walk? Large rats with big claws, she intones inside my mind, ravens eating my eyes out...fingernails scratching across my skin. Dead foxes in my bed. Jeez and here we both are out here in the dark mossy woods at the hem of the gathering night!

We're walking through a small overgrown graveyard. It's not just a sonic graveyard, it's really there. Someone whistling over to the left (no one). Cardiff (we) whistle(s) back (not really). The old woman returns: Now we live underground, the sun has become too hot because of the bombs, the houses and barns have fallen down, burnt by fires in the middle of the day. Now there are voices from the distance - loud, rude, intrusive. It scares me to death because, deep in the middle of my reverie upon Cardiff's sonic opera of loss and grief, there now come voices (somebody has overheard us, we are trespassing, we are found out, we are not wanted here?) yelling sharply to use: HEY!! yells one of them. HEY!!! yells another from a second direction. I'm frozen to the spot. Then a male voice, up close, whispers, Breathe into my mouth. Now there is breathing in each ear, singing, nightingales calling to each other. This is walk-through cacophony of great beauty and sadness. The old woman speaks to us one last time: I am trying to tell you some truth by going back and remembering. To know that I really did live and now you walk in this place where I walked.

Singing. Transfixed by its loveliness. Then Cardiff delivers us both: Dead leaves under my feet. Nettles against my bare legs. My shoes are wet through to my toes. The wind is in my face...the leaves are moving in the breeze, the birds are singing...there's a car in the distance [you hear the phantom car going by on the road nearby]. These things are real, aren't they?

And the singers fade. The crunching walk over the dead leaves continues long enough to get us back up towards Wanas - and then the sounds of walking fade, too.

I look up and there is Carl-Gustaf waiting for me. I unhook the headphones and hand him back the Discman. He doesn't ask me what I think. He knows what I think. "Come back to the house for some tea," he says. And we do that.