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Wera HIPPESROITHER teaches academic writing at the University of Applied Sciences for Communication and Management Vienna, following a background in research management at the University of Applied Arts Vienna. Her research examines the performative nature of urban space through the lens of postmodern subject politics. Her dissertation integrated sociological perspectives on the postmodern city with an analysis of subjectivity, specifically focusing on how urban space is performed through walking. By exploring the intersection of performativity, space, and the act of walking, her work establishes a novel analytical framework for addressing socio-cultural and historical discourse within Urban and Performance Studies.

Walking between Presence and Absence: Navigating the Palimpsest in Janet Cardiff's Audio and Video Walks

Abstract: This article examines how Janet Cardiff's site-specific walk-based performances utilize intermedial technologies to re-read and intervene in the city understood as a processual palimpsest. Moving beyond digital simulation, I argue that virtuality operates as an ontological and affective field of force, converting the participant's body into a subjective palimpsest where physical space, recorded media and spectral histories collide. Through a comparative analysis across three distinct spatial topographies - *The Missing Voice (Case Study B)* (London, 1999), *Her Long Black Hair* (New York, 2004), and *Alter Bahnhof Video Walk* (Kassel, 2012) - this essay explores how varying site topographies and media modes alter the mechanics of corporeal mimesis. In *Her Long Black Hair*, binaural audio and archival photos compel the walker to act as a spectral excavator unearthing the erased nineteenth-century community of Seneca Village beneath a manicured landscape. In *The Missing Voice*, acoustic intimacy guides the active decoding of visible architectural strata in London's East End, where historical trade, migration and crime intersect. In *Alter Bahnhof Video Walk*, the shift to a handheld video screen introduces hyper-synchronous double vision, locking the participant's movement into direct alignment with recorded space while navigating Kassel Hauptbahnhof. Ultimately, Cardiff's works disrupt habitual urban navigation, shifting the participant from a passive voyeur into an embodied, ethical witness. By demonstrating that urban memory and space are performatively enacted through relational subjectivity, these walk-based interventions prove that historical erasures do not remain passive archives, but act as living, disruptive forces capable of recalibrating both selfhood and contemporary lived space.

Keywords: Janet Cardiff, Palimpsest, Spatial Theory, Intermedial Performance, Site-specific Performance

Résumé: Cet article analyse la manière dont les performances de Janet Cardiff conçues pour des sites spécifiques et fondées sur la déambulation mobilisent des technologies intermédiaires

pour relire et investir la ville, envisagée comme un palimpseste en devenir. Au-delà de la seule simulation numérique, il s'agit de montrer que la virtualité fonctionne comme un champ de forces à la fois ontologique et affectif, transformant le corps du participant en un palimpseste subjectif où se rencontrent et s'entrechoquent espace physique, médias enregistrés et histoires spectrales. À partir d'une analyse comparative de trois configurations spatiales distinctes — *The Missing Voice (Case Study B)* (Londres, 1999), *Her Long Black Hair* (New York, 2004) et *Alter Bahnhof Video Walk* (Kassel, 2012) — cet article examine comment la configuration des sites et les différents dispositifs médiatiques transforment les modalités de la mimésis corporelle. Dans *Her Long Black Hair*, l'écoute binaurale et les photographies d'archives amènent le promeneur à endosser le rôle d'un archéologue spectral, faisant resurgir, sous un paysage soigneusement aménagé, les traces effacées de la communauté sénéque du XIXe siècle. Dans *The Missing Voice*, l'intimité acoustique oriente le déchiffrement actif des strates architecturales visibles de l'East End londonien, où se croisent histoire des échanges commerciaux, migrations et criminalité. Dans *Alter Bahnhof Video Walk*, le recours à un écran vidéo portatif produit une forme de double vision hypersynchrone, qui fait coïncider les mouvements du participant avec ceux de l'espace enregistré tandis qu'il traverse la gare centrale de Kassel. En définitive, les œuvres de Cardiff perturbent les modes habituels de perception et de parcours de l'espace urbain, faisant passer le participant de la position de voyeur passif à celle de témoin incarné et engagé. En montrant que la mémoire et l'espace urbains se constituent performativement à travers une subjectivité relationnelle, ces œuvres fondées sur la déambulation révèlent que les effacements historiques ne demeurent pas à l'état d'archives inertes : ils continuent d'agir comme des forces vivantes et perturbatrices, susceptibles de reconfigurer tout à la fois le rapport à soi et l'espace vécu contemporain.

Mots-clés : Janet Cardiff, Palimpseste, Théorie spatiale, Performance intermédiaire, Performance in situ

Introduction

Janet Cardiff is a Canadian installation and performance artist who, frequently in collaboration with George Bures Miller, creates site-specific works exploring the intricate relationship between voice, spatiality, and sensory perception. While her catalog spans various genres, she is best known for her audio and video walks: intermedial practices that defy simple classification as multi-media installations, performance art or traditional audioguides.¹ This article examines how Cardiff's walk-based works utilize sensory technology to re-read and intervene in the city understood as a palimpsest: a processual surface where layers of narrative, architectural intention and historical erasure are superimposed, overwritten and continuously contested.

To interrogate how urban memory is performatively activated across distinct spatial topographies and evolving media, this analysis engages comparatively with three key works: *The Missing Voice (Case Study B)*, *Her Long Black Hair* and *Alter Bahnhof Video Walk*. In *Her Long Black Hair*, staged in Central Park, participants are equipped with binaural headphones, a map and archival photographs as they follow Cardiff's voice along a path that unearths the buried "landscape of absence"² of Seneca Village, a nineteenth-century community of African American landowners and immigrants displaced to construct the park. In *The Missing Voice (Case Study B)*, participants navigate the dense, built streetscape of London's East End, where fiction collides with visible architectural strata of trade, migration and gentrification written directly onto brick and mortar. Finally, in *Alter Bahnhof Video Walk*, the transition from pure audio to a handheld video screen introduces a hyper-synchronous double vision within Kassel's historic transit hub, confronting the walker with the spatial trauma of WWII Holocaust deportations.

By engaging with Cardiff's body of work, this article asks: how do varying site topographies from manicured parkland to dense urban grids and transit infrastructure and technological modes alter the mechanics of corporeal mimesis and the walker's subjective palimpsest? I argue that Cardiff's intermedial strategy transforms the participant from a

¹ Cf. Janet Cardiff and Mirjam Schaub, *Janet Cardiff: The Walk Book* (Köln: Walther König, 2005).

² Emilie Pine, Maeve Casserly and Tom Lane, 'Walks of Experience: Site-Specific Performance Walks, Active Listening and Uncomfortable Witnessing', *Theatre Research International* Vol. 45, Issue 1 (2020): 32.

passive urban consumer into an embodied witness, converting the city-as-palimpsest from a static historical archive into an active, disruptive and deeply ethical encounter.

The City as a Palimpsest

In contemporary urban theory, the city is often described as a text, but drawing on scholars like Nick Kaye (2000), Miwon Kwon (2002) and Rosalyn Deutsche (1996), it is more accurately conceptualized as a palimpsest. In a historical context, a palimpsest is a parchment where past writing has been scraped away to make room for new text. Because materials like vellum (calfskin) were prohibitively expensive, the act of erasing was a necessity. However, this erasure, usually achieved through physical abrasion (scraping) or chemical treatment (citric acid) was rarely absolute, leaving ghostly traces behind. In this sense, this surface can be seen as a site of constant negotiation between the past and the present. Applying this specific performative nature of the palimpsest to urbanism,³ the city is a surface where layers of time, narrative and architectural intention are superimposed, erased and partially overwritten. As Henri Lefebvre famously argued in *The Production of Space*, urban space is not a static container but a relational structure that is performed into existence.

Her Long Black Hair serves as a seminal case study for this, treating Central Park not as a fixed geographic site, but as a network of living narratives. The contemporary city is constantly reshaped by community co-design, guerilla gardening and grassroots interventions; it is not a finished architecture. Ulrike Haß redefines the palimpsest not merely as a literary device, but as a spatial and ontological model for contemporary theater, constituting double- or multi-layered spaces by imprinting former structures within a present.⁴ Rejecting traditional Hegelian theories based on symmetrical conflict and following Heiner Müller's definition of the tragedy as a "site of contradictions" (orig. *Stellplatz der Widersprüche*), she argues that theater today functions as a space where irreconcilable temporalities and asymmetric worldviews coexist on a shared surface.⁵ This leads to in-situ experiences, where

³ See also Jisha Menon, 'Palimpsestic City: Nostalgia in Neoliberal Bangalore', in *Neoliberalism and Global Theatres*, edited by Lara D. Nielsen and Patricia Ybarra (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

⁴ Cf. Ulrike Haß, 'Palimpseste für ein Theater der Gegenwart', in *Spuren des Tragischen im Theater der Gegenwart*, edited by Silke Felber and Wera Hippenrother (Tübingen: Narr, 2020), 15, transl. by author.

⁵ Ibid., 24.

performers and audiences alike become co-creators and “[t]he principle of their situating emerges - their presence within surrounding and shared worlds, their embeddedness.”⁶ Thinking urban space as a palimpsest makes it possible to perceive and incorporate underlying texts – of historical, political and personal nature – as part of the cities we inhabit.

Haß speaks of ‘transition zones’ that “do not separate a past from a present, an outside from an inside, nor a prior time from the here and now”.⁷ Accordingly, I view the city as a processual dispositive where layers of time are folded into one another, requiring a performative act to become legible. A palimpsest always retains the ghostly traces of its previous inscriptions; applied to the city, drawing on Henri Lefebvre,⁸ the palimpsest represents the tension between the ‘conceived space’ (the official maps and architectural plans that attempt to overwrite history) and the ‘lived space’ (the representational space of the inhabitants). Site-specific performance utilizes the urban environment as a space of agency where these underlying layers are re-activated. The city thus becomes a relational structure that is performed. A palimpsest requires a specific type of reader: one who does not look down from above as the voyeur or map-maker but who walks within it. Michel de Certeau⁹ posits that walking is a tactical act of speech that re-writes the urban text. More recent walking methodologies, such as Tina Richardson’s *Schizocartography* (2014) and the so-called mis-guides of *Wrights & Sites* that disrupt habitual urban navigation, demonstrate how walking shifts from an everyday stroll into a performative action.

While *Her Long Black Hair* mobilizes Central Park’s manicured, seemingly naturalized landscape to unearth a “landscape of absence”,¹⁰ Cardiff’s earlier audiowalk *The Missing Voice (Case Study B)* tests the palimpsestic model within the dense, built architecture of London’s East End. Where the Central Park walk requires the participant to dig beneath an aesthetic façade to expose a concealed displacement, *The Missing Voice* operates in a spatial topography where historical inscriptions remain explicitly and materially visible on the urban surface. Navigating a route from the Whitechapel Library through Spitalfields, the walker

⁶ Ibid., 16, transl. by author.

⁷ Ibid., 15f, transl. by author.

⁸ Cf. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

⁹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

¹⁰ Pine, Casserly and Lane, ‘Walks of Experience: Site-Specific Performance Walks, Active Listening and Uncomfortable Witnessing’, 32.

moves through an architectural grid while Cardiff's binaural narration weaves hardboiled detective fiction with historical fragments, referencing nineteenth-century Huguenot silk weavers, Jack the Ripper and the neighborhood's evolution into a Bangladeshi cultural hub alongside contemporary gentrification. In both walks, the participant's bodily movement generates an acute friction between visual perception and acoustic immersion; however, while London confronts the walker with a material, architectural palimpsest whose visible strata must be decoded, Central Park forces the walker to act as a spectral excavator of a physically obliterated ground. The sensory dislocation forces the participant to experience urban space as an active collision of historical epochs rather than a linear timeline. Cardiff's practice doesn't merely document hidden histories, her works demonstrate how different urban environments demand distinct performative tactics.

To understand how the multiple urban layers reside within each other, we can utilize Gilles Deleuze's notion of the *fold*.¹¹ Deleuze suggests that time is not a linear progression; rather, the past is folded into the creases of the present. In Cardiff's work, the mediated corporeality of the participant acts as the point where these folds are opened. Urban performativity ensures that the palimpsest is never fully erased. By superimposing recorded audio onto live environments, Cardiff transforms the simple act of walking into a heterotopic practice. Heterotopias are counter-sites where incompatible real spaces that function as "other spaces" are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted.¹² In *Her Long Black Hair*, the participant's moving body becomes a living counter-site where the twenty first-century leisure of the park and the nineteenth-century trauma of the displaced Seneca Village community are held in simultaneous tension. Similarly, in *The Missing Voice*, the walker's body functions as a heterotopia where contemporary gentrified commerce is directly inverted by the ghosts of marginalized migrant labor, Victorian crime and *noir* fiction. In both cases, the participant is converted from a passive consumer of urban scenery into an active co-performer of the city's suppressed memories, which transforms the walk into an ethical encounter.

It is ethical precisely because it forces the walker to actively embody and hold space for the social and cultural erasures necessary to build the modern city, transitioning the participant from a passive consumer of history into a co-performer of its grief. Thus, the

¹¹ Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

¹² Cf. Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', *Diacritics* Vol. 16, Issue 1 (1986).

participant's body becomes the site where the city's multiple temporalities are negotiated: history is not just remembered, it is performed into the present moment. Urban performativity, therefore, is a process that prevents the palimpsest from ever being fully erased. It ensures that the ghosts of a yesterday continue to reside and influence how we navigate through today, asserting the necessity of acknowledging marginalized histories within the contemporary urban text.

Framing the city as a palimpsest thus is an inherently political act, as it challenges the official narratives of urban progress and policy. By acknowledging hidden or obscured histories (such as the displacement of the Seneca Village community), the performance practice intervenes in the city's ongoing narration. The palimpsest triggers a process of "uncomfortable witnessing",¹³ as Cardiff's work reveals that the urban environment is never a finished text but an ongoing relational process, which makes the performance an ontological disruption, using the walker's body. The participant's physical presence acts as a catalyst, demonstrating how the palimpsest's historical traces continue to shape our navigation of the present. The core of this intervention lies in the sensory collision between the 'conceived space' of the park and the 'lived space' of the erased village,¹⁴ confronting participants with the uncomfortable aspects of urban progress.

Postmodern Palimpsestic Bodies

The guiding motif of the discussed works is the temporal suspension of the body. As Cardiff states in *Her Long Black Hair*'s audio track: "One step after another, one foot moving into the future and one in the past. [...] Our bodies are caught in the middle."¹⁵ Through binaural audio technology and visual media, the past infiltrates the present, creating "a reality more real than reality itself."¹⁶ The audience hears or sees things as if they were there, while

¹³ Pine, Casserly and Lane, 'Walks of Experience: Site-Specific Performance Walks, Active Listening and Uncomfortable Witnessing'.

¹⁴ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*.

¹⁵ Author has access to the original audio files. Also accessible via *Public Art Fund*'s website on the performance: <https://www.publicartfund.org/exhibitions/view/her-long-black-hair> (accessed February 2, 2026).

¹⁶ Josette Féral, 'How to define presence effects: The work of Janet Cardiff', in *Archaeologies of Presence: Art, Performance and the Persistence of Being*, edited by Gabriella Giannachi, Nick Kaye and Michael Shanks (London: Routledge, 2012), 41.

knowing they are not present, resulting in what Féral calls a ‘presence effect’.¹⁷ Through the walk, the participants become witnesses, forced to finish the tale or overwrite it by their bodily movement. This witnessing is deeply physical; the walker’s own movements make the ghostly body of the past manifest in the present. By treading upon the literal ground of displacement, the participant’s body becomes a site of negotiation. This layering creates an uncanny sensation where the familiar becomes strangely alienated. It’s almost like the walker experiences a split subjectivity, being both themselves and the other, which at the same time, is characteristic of the postmodern urban experience and emblematic for how the city and the inhabitant’s body stand in a productive relation to each other: “[...] the unconcealed body does not stand opposed to the scenes of the city. Instead, it finds its position shifting (in place/out of place) within the discursive sites and the canals of meaning that regulate or affect the drifting of identities.”¹⁸

Bodies are sites where discursive lines cross, which leads to the idea that the body itself is a palimpsest, mirroring the urban. As the walker aligns their footsteps with Cardiff’s narration, they are not just *reading* the city’s layers, they are allowing those layers to *rewrite* their own situational identity. The participant’s sense of self is produced through the relation to the other (the disembodied voice) and the palimpsest is the spatial manifestation of this non-linear identity. Just as the city is an ongoing event, the relational subject is in constant flux. By moving through the urban space, the subject thus performs their identity into existence. Here, it is crucial to delineate the urban palimpsest from the subjective palimpsest. If the urban palimpsest contains the environmental layers of the city, the subjective palimpsest is the walker’s own layered identity, which is continually rewritten through spatial engagement.

As Jensen notes: “[T]he way we bodily engage with places through multiple ways of circulating in, out of and across them shape an important part of the practical engagement with the world that ultimately constructs our understandings of self and other.”¹⁹

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Johannes Birringer, *Theatre, Theory, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 28.

¹⁹ Ole B. Jensen, ‘Flows of Meaning, Cultures of Movements – Urban Mobility as Meaningful Everyday Life Practice’, *Mobilities* Vol. 4, Issue 1 (2009), 154f.

In both *The Missing Voice* and *Her Long Black Hair*, corporeal mimesis operates primarily through an acoustic and psychological intimacy while the participant's vision remains uncompressed. While the acoustic space is governed by binaural immersion, the walker's gaze is free to scan the physical space, allowing a flexible relationship between what is heard in the headphones and what is seen on the pavement.

This flexibility is radically disciplined in Cardiff and Bures Miller's *Alter Bahnhof Video Walk* in Kassel (2012), fundamentally reconfiguring the mode of corporeal mimesis. Staged in Kassel's Hauptbahnhof, participants hold a portable display showing pre-recorded video footage captured from the exact perspective of their physical path. This visual overlay creates a double vision, locking the participant's physical gaze to the digital camera lens. Thus, *Alter Bahnhof* demands hyper-synchronous bodily discipline: the walker must match their stride, head orientation and pacing to the movement rendered on screen. This technological shift intensifies the uncanny sensation of split subjectivity. As the display introduces spectral figures, dancers and references to the station's dark history as a departure point for WWII Holocaust deportations, the participant's physical body is converted into an interface where live environment, digital space and historical trauma simultaneously converge.

If movement is inherently identity-forming, the audiowalk - as a specific mode of mobility - forms a liminal identity that exists in-between the layers of the urban text. While Deleuze explains how historical temporalities fold into present space, Lacan's Real²⁰ accounts for the sudden, traumatic rupture that occurs when those temporal folds puncture the walker's everyday, symbolic reality: through the performative work, the subject is brought face-to-face with the Real. In *The Missing Voice*, this rupture occurs when the escapist tropes of hardboiled *noir* fiction collide with the unscripted, material realities of East London's history of migration, poverty and urban displacement. In *Her Long Black Hair*, the Real erupts when the scenic beauty of Central Park collapses against the unassimilable history of Seneca Village's destruction.

In *Alter Bahnhof*, it strikes when the routine, functional reality of a modern train station is shattered by the video screen's ghostly re-enactment of Holocaust departures. By

²⁰ Cf. Jacques Lacan, *The Language of the Self*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956).

walking through these spaces of absence and erasure, the participant encounters the Real of the city's history. This encounter is deeply uncomfortable because it strips away *spatial innocence* by disrupting the walker's stable, detached point of view. The urban palimpsest becomes an active political force as the participant's palimpsestic body serves as the interface through which suppressed histories pass. Cardiff's work does not merely present a hidden history from an archival distance, it provokes a relational redefinition of the subject, transforming the walker from a casual passerby into an ethical witness whose movement performatively re-activates public memory in the present moment and in doing so, the walker-subject is reconstituted by the very history they are witnessing.

Urban Performativity and Corporeal Mimesis

The core of urban performativity lies in this transformative power of movement. Grounding this performative action in established ethnographies of walking,²¹ it becomes clear how a performative walk differs from an everyday stroll. While the everyday stroll relies on habitual, linear navigation, Cardiff's walks utilize performative discontinuities, sudden changes in perspective, fragmented historical anecdotes and spatial detours to evacuate the linear narrative, forcing an embodied awareness. This performative act shifts the hierarchy of urban navigation from the visual – as de Certeau's voyeur – to the acoustic and corporeal, the walker immersed in it. By engaging in corporeal mimesis, the participant performs the palimpsest's historical layers into the present moment. Urban performativity constitutes the body as a site where the city's multiple temporalities are negotiated, aligning with de Certeau's idea of walking as a tactical act. As de Certeau famously posits that "to walk is to lack a place",²² suggesting that the act of walking is a nomadic practice that eludes the totalizing gaze of the map. In the discussed works, the walker's footsteps become a tactical act of speech that rearticulates the city's hidden layers. The city becomes a repository of ghostly matters: narratives that have been marginalized, erased, or built over, yet remain

²¹ See Tim Ingold and Jo Lee Vergunst (eds.), *Ways of Walking: Ethnography and Practice on Foot*, (London: Routledge, 2016); Maggie O'Neill and Brian Roberts, *Walking Methods: Research on the Move*, (London: Routledge, 2019).

²² De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 103.

“present in their absence”.²³ Cardiff’s performance practice produces cultural spaces that are essentially political, by rendering the urban space an intermedial site where the ghostly traces of the past are only made manifest through the ephemeral. This lingering haunting challenges official narratives, asserting the enduring power of memory and the necessity of acknowledging marginalized histories within the contemporary urban text. The city is revealed to be a site of ongoing struggles between the “prescribed paths” of urban policy and the “subversive steps” of the walker.²⁴ By acknowledging these traces, the performance recalibrates our understanding of urbanity: the city is not a finished architecture but a multilayered space where every step has the potential to overwrite a dominant narrative with reclaimed memory.

Across *Her Long Black Hair*, *The Missing Voice* (Case Study B) and *Alter Bahnhof Video Walk*, Janet Cardiff’s intermedial practices demonstrate that the city-as-palimpsest is neither a static archival surface nor a uniform spatial mechanism. Instead, the performative activation of urban memory is inextricably bound to site topography and technological mediation. In the manicured, naturalized environment of Central Park, the walk functions as a spectral excavation, pulling the erased nineteenth-century history of Seneca Village through soil and greenery to transform a stroll into an uncomfortable ethical encounter. In the built density of London’s East End, *The Missing Voice* demands a different mode of engagement: an active decoding of visible architectural strata, where historical trade, migration and crime collide directly on the physical brick and mortar.

With *Alter Bahnhof Video Walk*, the shift from binaural audio to screen-mediated double vision intensifies corporeal mimesis, locking the participant’s physical movement into a hyper-synchronous alignment with recorded space while navigating a transit site heavy with Holocaust trauma. Ultimately, these works prove that urban space is performed into existence through the walker’s embodied presence. By deploying intermedial tools such as binaural soundscapes, archival photos, and real-time video overlays, Cardiff converts the participant’s body into a subjective palimpsest - a nodal point where live sensory reality, disembodied narration and historical trauma converge. This bodily convergence shatters the illusion of the

²³ Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

²⁴ De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*.

detached urban voyeur, replacing passive consumption with a split, relational subjectivity. By transforming the walker into an ethical witness, Cardiff's site-specific works operate as a radical political and ontological intervention. They ensure that erased narratives and ghostly traces do not remain passive history but actively disrupt the ongoing narration of the contemporary city, proving that memory is a living, transformative force capable of recalibrating both identity and lived space.

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