



A sound installation that layers time and landscape: Janet Cardiff's *Her Long Black Hair*. Photo courtesy Public Art Fund

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A Sound-Art Project Reconfigures Central Park

By Karen E. Steen
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"It's loud here, isn't it?" the voice asks.

Yes, you think, it certainly is. The bench you occupy, at the small plaza where Sixth Avenue runs into Central Park, is as much of the city as it is of the park. Sirens are bearing down on you from the east, up in your left ear, as though the ambulances and fire trucks might run you down. Startled, you turn to look--but there's not an emergency vehicle in sight, just Central Park South's endless stream of yellow cabs and delivery vans, a few horse carriages waiting patiently at the curb for a midmorning fare. Ah, this is the performance, you realize, turning down the volume on the audio headset you've been given. The sound of rain, the passing clop of horse hooves, a marching band's blare--any of it *could* be happening at this moment, but isn't.

This is the compelling tug of *Her Long Black Hair*, Janet Cardiff's sound-art installation for Central Park, a summer project sponsored by the [Public Art Fund](#). As Cardiff's recorded voice guides you on a walk through the park, it's eerie how realistic the soundtrack of incidental noise is and how frequently what you see matches up with what she is describing: there is a man reading a newspaper on the bench, an ice-cream truck blocking your view of Bow Bridge, and an Asian couple posing for pictures in their wedding outfits.

Stranger still is what doesn't match up but could. As you overhear snippets of passing conversation, you wonder, Is that part of the piece? Did the Public Art Fund hire the musician-type with the black suit and ratted hair to stand by the duck pond looking morose just as a Nick Cave song kicks in on the headset soundtrack?

It is this sensation of synchronicity that's at the heart of Cardiff's piece--a stream-of-consciousness ramble that weaves Baudelaire quotes, the Orpheus myth, snippets of opera, personal memories, a mysterious love story, and historical tidbits with observations about the life of the park on a typical afternoon. You are seeing the landscape through layers of time, witnessing how it both changes and stays the same.

The point, as Cardiff tells you early on, is to be in the moment, to notice everything and take its weight. It is the transitory and insignificant things that turn out to be most meaningful, she tells you, quoting Heidegger. An egret coasting low over the surface of a pond. The sound of a gondolier's singing growing both louder and more distant as his boat glides under a bridge.

And herein lies the greatest achievement of the piece. Through heightening your awareness, Cardiff transforms even frequented sections of the park: everything you see becomes a potential work of art, an existing aperture that you've failed to look through until now. For the first time you notice that a bench you've passed a hundred times has an unusual plaque: instead of a name, it bears the phrase "Entirely of Possibility." Could it be part of the performance? Or have such possibilities always been embedded in your daily travels--if only you had the capacity to draw them out?

When the 48-minute walk ends, you feel as though you have been on a long and

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somehow transformative journey through a landscape that is at once familiar and wholly new. The challenge Cardiff sets you is to continue bringing such attention to bear even after you've returned the headset, to extend your walk into a summer-long excursion of close discernments and unexpected discoveries.

Her Long Black Hair is open 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Thursday through Monday until September 13. Free audio headsets are available at Sixth Avenue and W. 59th Street (look for the bright green kiosk on the park side of 59th). The tour is free, but visitors must leave a credit card or ID in exchange for the headset.