

MIRIAM'S WORLD

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

GRADUATE PROGRAM IN FILM
YORK UNIVERSITY
TORONTO, ONTARIO

May 2019

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ABSTRACT

Miriam's World is a multi-screen, multi-media interactive installation piece, based on Martha Baillie's novel *The Incident Report*. Laid out like a journal, the book comprises 144 incidents in the main character Miriam Gordon's life, recorded on blank incident report forms she finds in the library where she works.

Originally intended to be a narrative feature film, I began to explore the idea of creating a non-linear multi-media piece. It would be a truer adaptation of the source material, keeping the granularity and the episodic form of the book I fell so in love with. I began to imagine a large-scale multi-screen piece that would tell the story of Miriam and immerse the viewer in her complex world. My thesis is a proof of concept of this larger piece.

A nine screen multi-media experience running on an eighteen-minute loop, *Miriam's World* is my first foray into expanded cinema. The move from traditional narrative cinema to non-linear storytelling has been a profound and eye-opening journey for me. This voyage into new territory has led to my questioning the value of narrative, the function of space, and the nature of interactivity. This paper is an attempt to describe the process I went through in order to shift my thinking from one form to another.

Dedicated to my son Lev and my dad Ivan.

Thank you for all the love and support.

And to Martha Baillie who created the astounding world of *The Incident Report*.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project would not have been possible without the support of my thesis committee.

Special thanks go to my thesis supervisor, Caitlin Fisher, and reader Mark-David Hosale whose incredible knowledge in the field of expanded cinema opened my eyes to a whole new practice. I would also like to thank John Greyson for his encouragement and enthusiasm for the project, and Kuowei Lee for all of his support and hard work behind the scenes.

Furthermore, a huge thanks to my dear friend and cousin Shelley Weinreb for her amazing design skills, esthetic prowess, and contributions to this work.

I would also like to thank my friends for being such good friends, and my family for always being there for me.

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INTRODUCTION

I am a filmmaker. I have spent the better part of two decades writing, producing, and directing narrative films. I came to filmmaking a little later in life; my roots are in design. My undergraduate degree was focused on theatre design, and I spent my first years in the industry as a costume designer.

My films are not heavy on story – one critic called my works “tone poems.” I tell stories about people who lead very still lives but who go through immense emotional shifts. One of my strengths, and the first thing that comes to me when I write, is the atmosphere and tone: the world I am creating for my characters to inhabit. Plot comes later.

My films to date¹ have a lot in common: sparse dialogue, very little camera movement, a strong focus on mise-en-scene, and very detailed and evocative sound design. Thematically, they all explore characters who live in self-imposed isolation and are forced to connect to the outside world. And my previous films have all been traditional narrative works. They are made to be presented on a large screen in front of a seated audience.

Some years back, I optioned a book by Toronto-based author Martha Baillie called *The Incident Report*². I fell in love with the material, the story, the character, and the world;

¹ Selected Titles: *The Pin* 2013, *Arrivals* 2007, *Peep* 2004, *A Dozen For Lulu* 2001.

² Baillie, Martha. *The Incident Report* (Toronto: Pedlar Press, 2009).

but more than anything I fell in love with the form of the book. Laid out like a journal, the book comprises 144 incidents in the main character's life, recorded on blank incident report forms she finds in the library where she works.

I began to adapt this work into a script – my plan was to make it into a narrative feature film. The book tells the story of Miriam Gordon, a librarian working in the heart of a Toronto neighbourhood home to the mad and the marginalised. The library patrons and their absurd interactions with Miriam become material for the wry poetic ramblings she writes every day on blank incident report forms. Miriam has been emotionally paralysed since her father's suicide over two decades earlier. He left no note, his body discovered in the family garage surrounded by his massive book collection. It is no coincidence that she ends up working at a library surrounding herself with books; she lives in a prison of her own making. Her life begins to change when she finds a series of notes hidden between the pages of books, left for her by someone who believes they are Rigoletto from the famous opera by Verdi.

I worked on the adaptation for some years, taking the project to film markets and professional labs, all the while writing and refining the script. It is a difficult adaptation: a passive protagonist, and a story which, rather than having a strong central arc, is a series of small moments that when gathered together make an impression, but also have to function independently.

During these years, I started seeing a real change in the art that I was experiencing. There seemed to be a shift taking place around me, and my thinking also started to shift. Artistic disciplines were morphing and meshing into fascinating and engaging multi-media works.

What if I made this book into a non-linear multi-media piece? It would be a truer adaptation of the source material, keeping the granularity and the episodic form I fell so in love with. Louise Bourgeois said about creating her famous installations she called cells: "...I wanted to create my own architecture and not depend on the museum space, not to have to adapt my scale to it. I wanted to constitute a real space which you could enter and walk around in."³ Similarly, I wanted my piece to take over the space it inhabited. I began to imagine a large-scale multi-screen piece that would tell the story of Miriam and immerse the viewer in her complex world.

Similar to the architecture of an onion, dozens of large screens, tall and lean like bookcases, would be placed in a maze of concentric circles, the viewer allowed to wander freely as different incidents took place on screens around them. At times the screens would act in unison, creating a kind of 360 cinema, the viewer in the middle of the library with Miriam. At times the screens would act individually, playing small unrelated incidents for the viewer to witness as they walked around the space. The screens would be interactive with patrons looking up from their books as viewers walked by. I wanted it

³ Greenberg, Jan & Jordan, Sandra. *Runaway Girl The Art of Louise Bourgeois* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2003), 56.

to feel personal. I wanted it to be a long form narrative installation piece, running on a loop at least an hour long.

Ana Serrano from the Canadian Film Centre, an expert in digital storytelling, told me that you are lucky if more than ten percent of your audience stays more than a few minutes. The big question for me was: How do you make a long form immersive installation interactive narrative piece and have people stay?

Then - a confluence of events: I could not find a producer for the narrative feature version of *The Incident Report*, and began to teach at Ryerson, so applied to do my MFA at York University. It was the perfect environment to explore this new way of storytelling.

I returned to do my MFA after a twenty plus year absence from academic life. In these twenty years I have come to know myself very well. I am a hands-on, practical, and experiential learner. I can read books until the cows come home; but until I do, or see, for myself, things just don't sink in. This led me to approach my thesis by:

1. Using my vast consumption of multi-media pieces as the basis for my research.
2. Diving head-first into the process of creating the work.

PART 1 – THE RESEARCH

I began to think critically about what I'd found to be the most interesting multi-media pieces in the last decade. I limited myself to pieces I had seen. I wanted a personal reference of what the experience felt like. Below are the five pieces I analysed and the lessons I learned.

THE WEATHER PROJECT by Olafur Eliasson, Icelandic-Danish large-scale installation artist.

The Weather Project is astounding in its design. As described by the Tate Modern:

In this installation, *The Weather Project*, representations of the sun and sky dominate the expanse of the Turbine Hall (in the Tate Modern). A fine mist permeates the space, as if creeping in from the environment outside. Throughout the day, the mist accumulates into faint, cloud-like formations, before dissipating across the space. A glance overhead, to see where the mist might escape, reveals that the ceiling of the Turbine Hall has disappeared, replaced by a reflection of the space below. At the far end of the hall is a giant semi-circular form made up of hundreds of mono-frequency lamps. The arc repeated in the mirror overhead produces a sphere of dazzling radiance linking the real space with the reflection. Generally used in street lighting, mono-frequency lamps emit light at such a narrow frequency that colours other than yellow and black are invisible, thus transforming the visual field around the sun into a vast duotone landscape.⁴

This is not a traditional viewing arrangement: no seated audience, no seats, no stage. The viewer can wander freely, and come and go as they please. It is immense; the power of its scale palpable. People, myself included, stayed for hours, lying on the ground, basking in the light, looking at themselves in the ceiling mirror. It is emotional; it is spiritual. It transforms the space it inhabits.

⁴ Exhibitions + Events, about the installation. <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/unilever-series/unilever-series-olafur-eliasson-weather-project-0>

THE CLOCK by Christian Marclay, American Swiss artist and composer.

This piece is like a meditation, a 24-hour loop created by editing together thousands of clips where a watch or clock is seen, or someone refers to the time. *The Clock* is an installation piece, screened in gallery spaces as art. However, it is actually set up as a traditional theatre or cinema space, with a limited amount of seating for the audience, Ikea couches, and a single large screen at the front of the room projecting the film. But it is not a film - it is a functioning time piece. In a profile on Christian Marclay for the *New Yorker* magazine, Daniel Zalewski tells us:

The Clock is far too long to be presented on a DVD. The work is a computer program—coded by Mick Grierson, a professor at Goldsmiths College, in London—that, when booted, launches into whichever clip matches the time, down to the microsecond. The system, which archives the video and audio tracks separately, requires setup. (As carefully tended as the system is, mishaps can occur: at the Pompidou, “The Clock” mysteriously fell a few minutes *en retard*).⁵

The viewer is free to come and go as they please, but people stay for hours watching the clock function, trying to wrench out some kind of narrative from all the clips. Time expands and shrinks as viewers sit and watch, getting sucked into fragments of narrative and then pulled out again

Marclay, who is predominantly a composer and sound artist, spent an immense amount of time and attention on the audio, reworking and remixing sound from the films, audio from one clip bleeding into the following clip. This contributed greatly to a cohesive film-like piece.

⁵ Daniel Zalewski, “The Hours How Christian Marclay created the ultimate digital mosaic.” The New Yorker, March 12, (2012):<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/03/12/the-hours-daniel-zalewski>

KISS AND CRY by Jaco Van Dormael, Belgian filmmaker, and choreographer Michèle Anne De Mey.

As described by Canadian Stage:

Where do people go when they disappear from our memory? This is the question haunting an elderly woman as she waits on the platform of a train station. She reflects on her greatest loves starting with her first: a boy whose hand she touched for a few seconds on a crowded train when she was 13-years-old. Two hands, one male, one female, portray the characters of this narrative with an engaging and sensual presence as they dance around a set of miniature landscapes with absolute precision.⁶

Kiss & Cry is a hybrid film/theatre/dance piece. In essence it is a live to air show, with cameras on stage live projecting a performance on a big screen behind them. Foley is performed live, with pre-recorded voice over and music filling out the sound scape. It is a film being created in front of the audience. The viewer can watch the film on the screen, or the live performance on the stage. It is profound, emotional, and beautiful. There is a very strong visceral recognition of the emotional state of the main character. It feels very personal and universal at the same time. It engages and resonates with the entire audience.

THE LIBRARY AT NIGHT by Robert Lepage – filmmaker, director, actor and creator.

The Library at Night is a two-piece experience set up in the basement of the BAnQ Grande Bibliothèque in Montreal. First the viewer is ushered into an ante-room, an elaborately decorated private library. A voice over recording tells the story of this library

⁶ Kiss and Cry, Canadian Stage.
https://www.canadianstage.com/Online/default.asp?doWork::WScontent::loadArticle=Load&B0param::WScontent::loadArticle::article_id=90954B09-E68D-45B6-A21C-683309385A6B

as the viewer explores the space for about ten minutes. The viewer is then instructed to open the wooden benches that line the edges of the room to find the oculus headsets needed to watch the VR portion of the experience. An usher pushes one of the bookshelves, and it spins open, becoming the doorway into the second room. This large space is a library/forest - dozens of birch trees, with books and pages as leaves, and rows of wooden library desks, with chairs and lamps at each desk. Here the viewer sits and watch a series of short VR pieces on famous libraries both fictional and real.

This was the least successful piece I experienced. It seemed to me there was a design flaw. Being captive in a chair while watching the VR meant you could not explore the library/forest around you, and this felt frustrating. I wanted to be in the ‘real world’ of the forest/library space they had created. They wanted me to put on a headset and experience a series of VR worlds.

But this was not the biggest problem with this piece. The spaces created were lush, detailed and evocative, but ultimately no emotional connection existed. The VR pieces themselves were beautifully filmed and created, but unengaging. Perhaps because there was no entry, I felt no connection to the work. Despite the very beautiful elements created to make up this experience, with no emotional connection, it fell flat. I learned two very important lessons from this experience. First, don’t make the real world more engaging than your VR world. Second, make sure the viewer has an emotional entry to the content.

40 PART MOTET by Janet Cardiff, Canadian sound artist.

Janet Cardiff's *40 Part Motet* is perhaps the most powerful piece I experienced, and definitely the closest to what I wanted to achieve with my piece. Aptly described by Cardiff herself as "...like walking into a piece of music,"⁷ this piece has people wandering in and around the installation freely. There is no stage or screen: this is a sound piece. As described by the National Gallery of Canada, "This brilliant sound is a reworking of *Spem in Alium*, a piece by 16th-century English composer Thomas Tallis. Forty separately-recorded choir voices are played back through 40 speakers positioned around the gallery."⁸

This piece is completely captivating. I saw people crying, hugging, and, in one case, praying. Everyone appeared in awe of the experience. It is what can only be described as visceral and spiritual. It has the ability to be experienced from the centre as a whole choral piece or, as the viewer walks around from speaker to speaker, as a collection of individuals singing a transcendent piece of music. It has a 'lean in' quality – it makes the viewer want to lean in and know the individuals who make up the whole. The piece itself is a 14-minute loop. I stayed in that room for at least an hour.

I learned two big lessons from these five works.

⁷Alva Noe. "The Power of 40 Speakers in a Room." NPR, March 10, 2017.

<https://www.npr.org/sections/13.7/2017/03/10/519587414/the-power-of-40-speakers-in-a-room>

⁸ National Gallery of Canada. <https://www.gallery.ca/whats-on/exhibitions-and-galleries/janet-cardiff-forty-part-motet-2>

LESSON 1 – STORYTELLING VS WORLDBUILDING

Art is a relationship - between creator and viewer. In traditional films this relationship is guided by narrative. So what is the role of narrative storytelling in all of these pieces? I found I could divide these five works into two categories.

Traditional Works

Kiss & Cry, The Clock, The Library at Night

These works use story and plot to engage the viewer. *Kiss & Cry* uses the very strong narrative device of voice over to drive the piece forward. There is a story being told - an old woman recalling the five love affairs that made up her life. *The Clock*, although not strictly a narrative piece, also uses narrative as a tool. When Marclay was assembling the clips to create the film, he deliberately placed them in relationship to other clips to encourage the viewer to see connections, thereby creating a loose narrative. *The Library at Night* uses voice over as narrator, both in the ante-room to tell the story of this private library, and then again in the VR pieces themselves to tell story of each specific library.

These traditional works use storytelling to keep the viewer engaged, in some cases very successfully and unconventionally, but they are all very traditional in form. An audience watches as a story unfolds.

Experiential Works

40 Part Motet, The Weather Project

The second category of works I describe as world building. Both *40 Part Motet* and *The Weather Project* have no narrative structure; there is no plot or character leading a story. The viewer is able to wander freely in a ‘curated space’ and experience the world that the artist has created. The only narrative is the one the viewer is creating for themselves.

This prompted me to ask the question: How important is story to installation?

The answer for me was not very.

And what about narrative in my piece?

I want to create a visceral experience, one that does not necessarily focus on story or plot, but rather on tone and world, to create emotional connection. I have done this before in my films, but how much of the audience’s engagement with my films come from story? Are my ‘tone poem’ films closer to poetry or prose? Is immersive work more like poetry than prose? Can I create a piece with no central story spine, where tone and world sustain interest? In the case of this specific installation about this librarian, can tone and visual metaphor alone make the viewer:

FEEL what it is like to be in an emotional prison?

FEEL what it is like to be inside Miriam’s World?

My conclusion, and my challenge - a very liberating one coming from an almost two-decades long practice as a narrative filmmaker - traditional story and plot are not necessary to create this piece and have people want to stay.

When talking about her sound walks, Janet Cardiff says: “I’m not interested in a sense of completion at the end. The type of short stories, novels and films I’ve always enjoyed are the ones that leave me wondering. You want to get a certain sense of completion and some of my walks aren’t successful because they leave people too unconnected. It’s a very fine line between connection and abstraction....It’s much better if you can tell someone something in a peripheral way, or in metaphors. In the art world you have the freedom to do that sort of thing.”⁹

There is a glorious freedom that comes with making this multi-screen installation piece that I have not experienced before in my narrative films. I can be much more abstract, using metaphor and image with very little structure. There is no need to support a story.

LESSON 2 – ARCHITECTURE

Art is a relationship between viewer and artist, but what I now understand so clearly from this research is that art is also a relationship between the space and the viewer. Again, there are two distinct categories in the five works surveyed:

⁹ Meeka Walsh and Robert Enright, “Pleasure Principals: The Art of Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller.” Border Crossings, Issue 78, May (2001): <https://bordercrossingsmag.com/borderindex/results/eyJjaGlsZDphcnRpY2x1X2F1dGhvcI6IjEifQ>

Traditional

Kiss & Cry, The Clock

In both of these pieces, the audience is seated watching a screen (and live performance in the case of *Kiss & Cry*). *Kiss & Cry* has the added traditional element of having a beginning and end. The show started at 8PM and ended ninety minutes later. The audience is seated and captive. *The Clock* has the same set up. A seated audience watches a single screen in front of them, the only difference being that the viewer can come and go as they please.

Arguably *The Library at Night* can be included in this category. The experience starts at a specific time, and the viewer has to wait to be guided into the anteroom by an usher. The viewer is not seated the whole time, but they are ‘on rails,’ like being on a rollercoaster, guided through spaces and experiences in a regimented way. There is no freedom to affect the narrative, only to consume the stories being told.

Experiential

40 Part Motet, The Weather Project

With *40 Part Motet* and *The Weather Project*, there is no formal architecture of audience watching performance. These are true installation pieces, no beginning, no end: *40 Part Motet* is on a loop, but that does not dictate when the viewer comes and goes, and *The Weather Project* is a constant presence, changing but constant. There is no seated audience, static and looking at a screen. The artists create their own architecture and their own worlds. The viewer is free to behave as they want in that space.

I am creating two pieces from the same source material (I continue to develop the traditional narrative feature film of *The Incident Report*). With the traditional narrative film, there will be an audience which understands the social construct of being an audience member. You sit in a chair, you watch a screen, you don't talk, you leave when the credits roll and the lights come up. The architecture of the space is clear; the rules understood by both the audience and filmmaker.

I now understand that with my installation piece there is no audience--there are participants. This is a question of body vs mind. Installation is physical energy forward - lean in. In film, the physical energy is passive - lean back. The architecture is completely different. Olafur Eliasson asserts, "The world we live in is relative; we are guided through it by our senses. I want the visitor to be the producer rather than the consumer of (a) reality."¹⁰

The next question I asked myself for the installation piece was: Is there a consequence to one's action or movement in the space?

Both the traditional narrative film and the installation piece I am creating from this book can engage intellect and emotion. However, with the film in the traditional viewing set-up, it is not about body. The viewer is not a physical participant in the piece. With the

¹⁰ Clara LeFort, "Olafur Eliasson Reflects on Ways of Seeing Ahead of His Latest Exhibiton." *Wallpaper Magazine*, 26 Jan (2018): <https://www.wallpaper.com/art/olafur-eliasson-interview-espace-muraille-geneva>

installation piece, I am world building and not storytelling. This feels like familiar territory. My films are so much about world building, and with my background in theatre design, perhaps this is a natural progression in my journey as an artist. I need to create an engaging world where the viewer is a necessary participant in the piece. People who come to see my piece will need to become library patrons, watching all the action, and taking action in the space.

The multiple screens and space will replace the need for traditional narrative. More specifically, the architecture of the installation itself will create a narrative as the viewer chooses how to explore the space and take in the content of the screens. As Holly Willis states, “Overall, the narratives displayed in video art are often about space, fragments, and the abundance of meaning...video art opens things up, dispersing meaning outward, both figuratively and literally, through the multiplication and dispersal of screens.”¹¹

This is a huge change in perspective and form for me as an artist, and it feels very exciting.

A NOTE ABOUT THE BOOK

This piece is not intended as a transmedia add-on for the book, but rather an experience in and of itself. If the viewer comes with the experience of having read the book, they

¹¹ Willis, Holly. *New Digital Cinema Reinventing the Moving Image* (London: Wallflower Press, 2005), 84.

will have a different experience, but the piece does not rely on the viewer having knowledge of the content. There is no need for the viewer to have read the book.

PART 2 - CREATING MIRIAM'S WORLD

As a filmmaker, script is always the first step in my creative process. There are always images, ideas, and time spent thinking, but the first action is to write a script. When reading interviews about the different processes installation artists take with their work, I came across Finnish artist Eija-Liisa Ahtila's description of her process:

I always write a screenplay...but it was used during the shooting more as a supporting structure. The script is the first version of the work. Then, during production, at some point the work "opens itself up", dictating its conditions. It is a great moment. Like when you're putting together a jigsaw puzzle, and you start to get a sense of the big picture and it becomes easy to put the pieces in their right places.¹²

Her description sound like the writing, production, post-production process I use to create my traditional narrative. There is a very solid narrative plan that may unfold and change with time according to the stage of the work, but story is master and guides the process. I did not do that here. I wanted to change my approach completely.

I decided to start with something tangible. I created a model of the project as I saw it, trying to figure out the architecture. I could have done this in a number of different software programs, but again, knowing myself and my process, I wanted to start with something tactile. Thirty-two immense screens, playing in sync, in a large space. I was really attracted to the scale of this project. After reading Haidee Wasson's essay *The Networked Screen: Moving Images, Materiality, and the Aesthetics of Size*¹³, I understand

¹² Anna Iltner, "The viewer is not yet there. An interview with Finnish artist Eija-Liisa Ahtila." Arterritory, September 19, (2013): http://www.arterritory.com/en/texts/interviews/2807-the_viewer_is_not_yet_there._an_interview_with_finnish_artist_eija-liisa_ahtila/

¹³ Marchessault, Janine and Lords, Susan, eds. *Fluid Screens, Expanded Cinema* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press Inc, 2007), 69-106.

my attraction to scale is a direct reaction against the small screens a lot of content is viewed on now.



Image 1: Photo. The First Model of *Miriam's World*.

Wasson contrasts the use of Quicktime files and IMAX films to make her point.

Although now dated in terms of the technology she discusses, I realise my desire for scale is a protest again people watching films on phones, computers, and tablets. Wasson states, “It is these screens, clearly integral to the architecture of powerful institutions – corporate, urban, domestic – that shape, delimit, and also enable our encounter with moving images.”¹⁴

¹⁴ Ibid, 76.

At the very beginning of my process in a meeting with my advisors, we discussed the possibilities of creating this work in VR, AR, or as an app or online experience. I now understand my reaction against these was a desire for the immense and tangible. I do not want people to experience this alone on a small screen in a private space. I want people to experience *Miriam's World* in a large space, with other people, in a community, and on enormous screens – thirty-two of them. There is a part of me that is still holding onto traditional cinema's value of community and spectacle as being part of the experience.

However, I knew that the work represented in the model I had created was impossible given my timeframe and the \$15,000 SSHRC grant I was working with. It would need to be simplified. I decided my thesis would be to create a proof of concept for the larger piece.

THE VALUE OF INTERACTIVITY

I then turned to what I felt would be the hardest element to achieve – the interactivity. Like those portraits that follow you with their eyes, a patron on a screen would sense the viewer's presence and look up at them. I wanted it to feel personal, engaging, and seamless. My first tests were about interactivity. I planned to have screens react to the viewers' proximity. My tests were with Cinema and Media Arts PhD student David Han.

The plan was to create both 'film loops' - for example, a patron sits and reads - and 'event clips' - the patron looks up at the viewer. When the sensor is triggered by a

viewer's proximity, the event clip is inserted into the film loop. But we needed to move seamlessly between the loop and the clip. How could we do this? One solution was to have wipes - other patrons crossing the screen - and to begin and end the 'event clip' with similar wipes, allowing for an edit point. Since we did not know when a viewer would approach the screen, the wipes had to happen every few seconds. They also needed to be very close to camera and they had to take up the whole frame in order for the edit to work. This became quite clumsy and would only work on one or two screens without becoming obvious. Another solution to this problem was to have a 'film loop' that was a locked off shot of the library with no moving elements, so an 'event clip' could be easily inserted into the loop, no wipes required. But a static shot of a specific space in the library is not that interesting. This also felt clumsy and would not work on many screens.

This interactivity was going to take up a lot of time and resources. I began to question the value of it. I looked to two other artworks I had recently seen that were conceptually and practically interactive to clarify my thoughts on how to proceed.

Steer is a dance piece from Zata Omm Dance Project, by choreographer William Yong, created with Jérôme Delapierre and Navid Navab. Described here by World Stage:

This solo work...imagines a human trajectory where the boundary between flesh and technology becomes indistinct...Gathering sensory data from the dancer – using real-time motion capture, an infrared camera and accelerometer motion sensors – the technology interprets the dancer's movements and produces interactive effects instantaneously.¹⁵

This is a very captivating dance piece. The dancer is very talented, the choreography electric, and the projection and sound engaging. But when I was watching the piece I did not know it was interactive. I did not know the dancer was controlling the sound and the projection with his movements. I thought he was moving to predetermined sound and projection. If I had not stayed for the post-show talk, I never would have known. If no one knows it is interactive, if the artists feel they do not want to tip their hand to let the viewer know, and chose to keep it ‘invisible’, there seems to be no reward for all the work.

The second interactive piece is *Shalekhet (Fallen Leaves)* by Israeli artist Menashe Kadishman. As described by the Jewish Museum Berlin, “more than 10,000 faces with open mouths, cut from heavy round iron plates, cover the floor of (a space called) the ground floor void.”¹⁶

The viewer walks on top of a sea of faces, inside a cement walled corridor with very high ceilings. The sound created when the viewer walks is haunting, and the act of walking on

¹⁵ Harbourfront World Stage, about the performance, 2017 season:
<http://www.harbourfrontcentre.com/worldstage/steer/>

¹⁶ Jewish Museum Berlin, <https://www.jmberlin.de/en/shalekhet-fallen-leaves>

the faces is both harrowing and difficult. This piece is an example of ingenious and effective interactivity. The viewer is a necessary participant in the piece, creating the soundscape. It also elicits an intense emotional reaction by forcing the viewer, through its architecture, to walk on the faces.

Unlike Gary Hill's *Between Cinema and a Hard Place* where "... the technology calls attention to itself and makes viewers remember that they are not in a pastoral setting but in a museum space in front of state-of-the-art video technology."¹⁷ for my piece I want the viewers to forget that they are in a gallery viewing projected images. I want them to feel like they are in a strange library. I want them to feel transported. Now the questions I asked myself were:

Do you want people to know there is technology at work?

NO

Should the audience know that they are affecting the footage?

NO

Does the video need to be interactive?

NO

But I definitely want the piece to be interactive. With the absence of a narrative spine, this is one of the key elements to having people stay in the space. If they can touch books, write things, sit in armchairs, be living and breathing parts of the library, and become

¹⁷ S. Brent Plate. "Between Cinema and a Hard Place: Gary Hill's Video Art Between Words and Images." *Criticism*, 45 no1, Winter (2003), 114-115.

patrons, they will view and react to the ‘projected patrons’ on my screens in a way that will engage and sustain.

I turned to creating interactive elements that were more tangible like *Shalekhet*. This added the elements of set design and props to the piece, tactile objects that the viewer could touch, pick up and read, or feel.

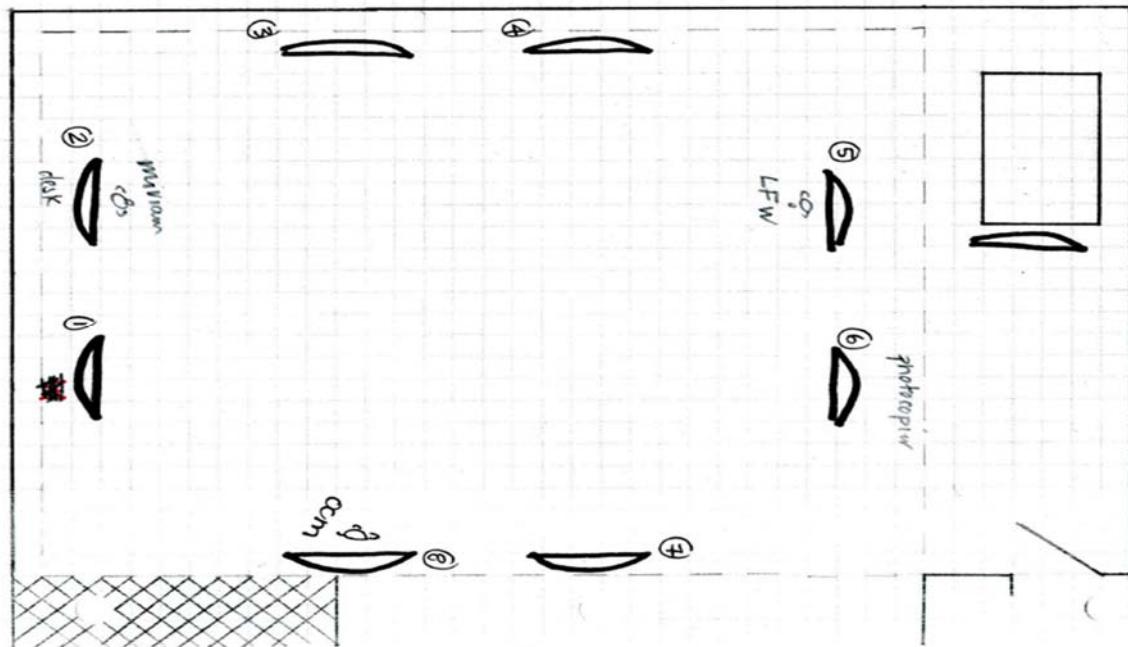


Image 2: Sketch. The First Floor Plan.

From that point on, I decided quickly on the set up of the room and number of screens, almost entirely dictated by the lab where I would be creating the work, and the limitations of my budget. I would use the four mounted projectors in the Transmedia Lab at York

University. I could create two separate screens from each projector to create a circle of eight screens. My onion would only have one layer, but this was a prototype after all. I decided to have only one character per screen for a total of eight characters, including the protagonist Miriam, the librarian. The screens would be made of scrim for the tactile quality that it would give the space, not to mention that it was an inexpensive solution. I imagined them long and lean like my original concept, sixteen feet by four feet. They would hang from the lighting grid in the lab. I also created a hallway space as an entrance into the installation, with a ninth screen that would play a video loop independent of the eight other screens. It would serve as an introduction into the world you were about to enter.



Image 3: Screenshot. The Eight Characters.

As Mark Stephen Meadows tells us in *Pause and Effect, the Art of Interactive Narrative*:

The narrator's job, like the architect's, is to organize information in a way that builds context, symbology, metaphor, and meaning. One of architecture's primary goals is to appropriately subdivide space. This process of subdivision is not only for social interaction, but, like punctuation in a sentence, it is also a means of framing concentration and the presentation of information. The basic approach to designing interactive narrative is the same; organize information so that meaning is created.¹⁸

¹⁸ Meadows, Mark Stephen. *Pause and Effect: The Art of Interactive Narrative* (Indiana: New Riders, 2003), e-book.

This hallway space was essential in immersing the viewer in the psychological space that Miriam inhabits before experiencing the physical world, the library where she works.

My thoughts then turned to how to shoot the content for the nine screens. Again esthetic, budget, and simplicity of production led me to choose shooting each character ‘lit’ in a black vacuum, so when projected onto the scrims they would appear almost like holograms in the space, perhaps inspired by artist Pierrick Sorin’s “miniature stage sets (where) he magically appears as small holograms”¹⁹ I had fallen in love with almost two decades earlier when I saw them in a gallery in Paris.

I would anchor each screen with a set piece such as a photocopier, a desk, an armchair, or a spinning book-rack. The characters would move around from screen to screen, but the ‘library’ would not. This meant I would be able to shoot in the studio at York rather than on location, and that I would not need to build a traditional set. This also meant I could use one lighting set up and a locked off camera.

PAPER AND OTHER ELEMENTS

As a result of only being able to have one circle of screens, I began to think about how to create more layers for my onion in an inexpensive and interesting way. I came up with the idea of paper scrolls, again, long and lean, hanging from the grid, with library bookshelves printed on them. This would create more layers in the space.

¹⁹ Vernissage TV, <https://vernissage.tv/2011/10/21/pierrick-sorin-optical-theaters-and-video-installations-at-galerie-albert-benamou-paris/>

Paper was becoming a very important element in this piece. It was tactile and approachable and I knew I wanted people to interact with the space. When describing Louise Bourgeois' cells in *Runaway Girl, the Artist Louise Bourgeois*, Jan Greenberg and Sandra Gordon write, "These artworks are the visual equivalents of one of her diaries, a mixture of intense pleasure and anxiety...And even if we don't know her story, the piece(s) call forth an emotional response from us."²⁰

I thought it would be powerful if these paper elements became a kind of diary of the library, offering up information and details on Miriam and the other patrons, readily available for those who took the time to explore. In the story, Miriam finds notes. I wanted the viewers, AKA the 'other patrons' to find things as well - the incident reports Miriam had written, the notes left for her by Rigoletto, and letters and scraps left by the other patrons.

Thinking of all these notes brought up a powerful image I had seen as a teenager while visiting the Western Wall in Jerusalem. The architecture of the wall was transformed with notes. They were electric, kinetic, and filled with people's most intimate prayers. I wanted to recreate that electricity. I could create the three "additive forms of interaction design and interactive components" Mark Stephen Meadows refers to in his book *Pause & Effect: The Art of Interactive Narrative* - "ambient information, perspectives and increasing investment."²¹

This led quickly to the thought of people being able to write their own notes and incident reports on forms and bits of paper I would leave in the space. I wondered how many

²⁰ Greenberg, Jan & Jordan, Sandra. *Runaway Girl The Art of Louise Bourgeois* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2003), 59.

²¹ Meadows, Mark Stephen. *Pause and Effect: The Art of Interactive Narrative*. Indiana: (New Riders, 2003), e-book.

notes could be left in one book? What would that do to the structure of the book? Where would people begin leaving notes? Tucked into the seams of the armchairs? On the tables? On the floor behind the screens? Who would find the notes? Who would read them?

WHAT TO SHOOT WHEN YOU HAVE NO SCRIPT?

I now knew the elements I would use. I had a strong vision of what the world would feel like and look like, but what about a script? What content would I shoot to create the video loops? I had not even thought of story in the traditional sense and I was well into my process. This was very interesting and liberating for me.

Again, for simplicity's sake, I decided I would shoot one dialogue scene with Miriam for each of the characters who would inhabit the main screens. That would take care of two of the eight screens at any given point, but how would I inhabit the other six screens?

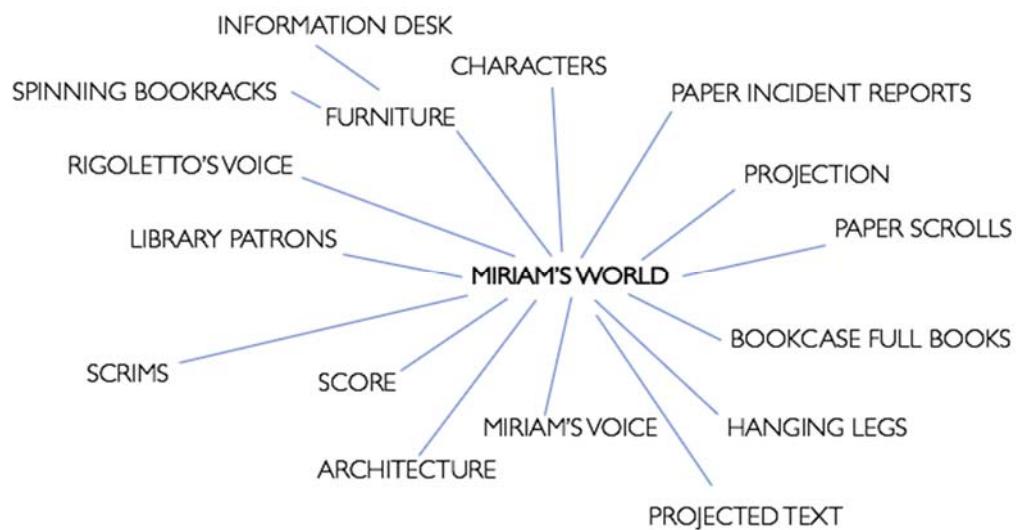


Image 4: Graph. The Elements that make up *Miriam's World*.

I ended up making a very elaborate shot list/spreadsheet instead of a script to figure out what elements I needed to shoot in order to get eight characters on eight screens moving in the space at once. I had to track eyelines, entrances and exits, duration of shot, screen position, set piece, character sitting or standing, and the props they would be carrying with them around the space.

This would be a hard shoot for the actors. Finding entry into this very technical piece was difficult, but it was essential to create compelling performances. I always try to have rehearsals when I make a film. With this piece it would prove essential. During these rehearsals, I created detailed backstories for each of the characters with the actors and had them performing an emotional, but mostly dialogue free ‘arc’ for their day in the library.

THE SHOOT

We had two days to get eighty-one shots. Because of the nature of the piece, they were all very long, single takes with some shots lasting as long as seven minutes. I wanted the characters to be seen full body at all times. I would not be shooting traditional coverage. I would not be editing inside a scene; rather I would be assembling clips, so I would not be able to control the pacing with the edit. Therefore, the internal pacing of each shot would need to work perfectly. This meant we would potentially have to do many takes. It also meant I needed to shoot one side of each dialogue scene on the first day so we could use it as playback when shooting the other side of the scene on the second day. The actors

were also very limited in how much they could move in the shot. The screens were four feet wide and that did not leave a lot of room for lateral movement. This was going to be a technically challenging shoot.



Image 5: Photos from set. Miriam's dead father on set and on screen.

We also had to shoot Miriam's father's suicide, an important emotional element for the piece. This was a complicated rig to build, as there would be an actor in the shot with a body dropping into frame, and you can't accidentally drop heavy dummies on actors' heads. Insurance won't cover that.

It was very intense, but the shoot went smoothly and I was pleased with both the look of the footage and the actors' performances.

FIRST PROJECTION TEST

The day after the shoot I had my first projection tests in the Transmedia Lab. It took ages to measure the space and find the placement of the screens but, ultimately, we got them all up and in the right spot. Hanging the scrims with fishing wire, as I had planned, was much too fiddly. I also realised I would be hanging and taking down these screens multiple times. I would need a better solution and decided to build little hanging rigs for each screen for my next test.

Seeing the footage projected was invaluable. I was thrilled to see the images. They looked beautiful, almost like Rembrandts. However, I did discover issues around scale and placement of the characters in space that needed resolving. I wanted the characters on the scrims to be life size, but of course when you walk up to a projected image, your shadow becomes part of the image. I did not want that. I would have to restrict the viewers movement so as not to enter the throw of the projector, or alternately, I would need to raise the characters off the floor to allow the viewer greater freedom to move around the space without disturbing the throw of the projected image.



Image 6: Set photo of Miriam at her desk, with photo of 'Rembrandt's Mother Reading', by Rembrandt van Rijn. 1629.

This led to the thought of having tables pushed up against the scrims, acting both as a floor for the projected characters to stand on, and as desks in the library I was creating in this space. In an interview, artist Angelica Mesiti speaks of the importance of the viewer's experience in creating community:

When I'm developing an installation, the viewer's experience as a participant within the work is something I always consider. Sometimes the installation is constructed to place people around a particular area in the room, on a certain path or on seats together. Creating a community within the installation, between the performers on screen and the audience, is something I am always thinking about.²²

²² Shaune Lakin, "The Calling an interview with artist Angelica Mesiti." Artonview 91, Spring 2017, 12.

Similarly, I was trying to create a community of library patrons out of the viewers. My goal was to create a familiar library setting anchored by the eight screens. I would dress the tables with lamps, books, papers, clipboards with blank incident report forms, and pens and pencils. I would have four wheely office chairs tucked into each table for viewers to sit on, allowing them to spin and wheel around to see all of the screens as they liked, as well as forcing them to sit next to another viewer ‘patron.’ The corners of the room would have armchairs, and my paper scrolls with printed bookshelves would hang throughout the space. The placement of the furniture, chairs, and props would work to help create this feeling of ‘library community.’

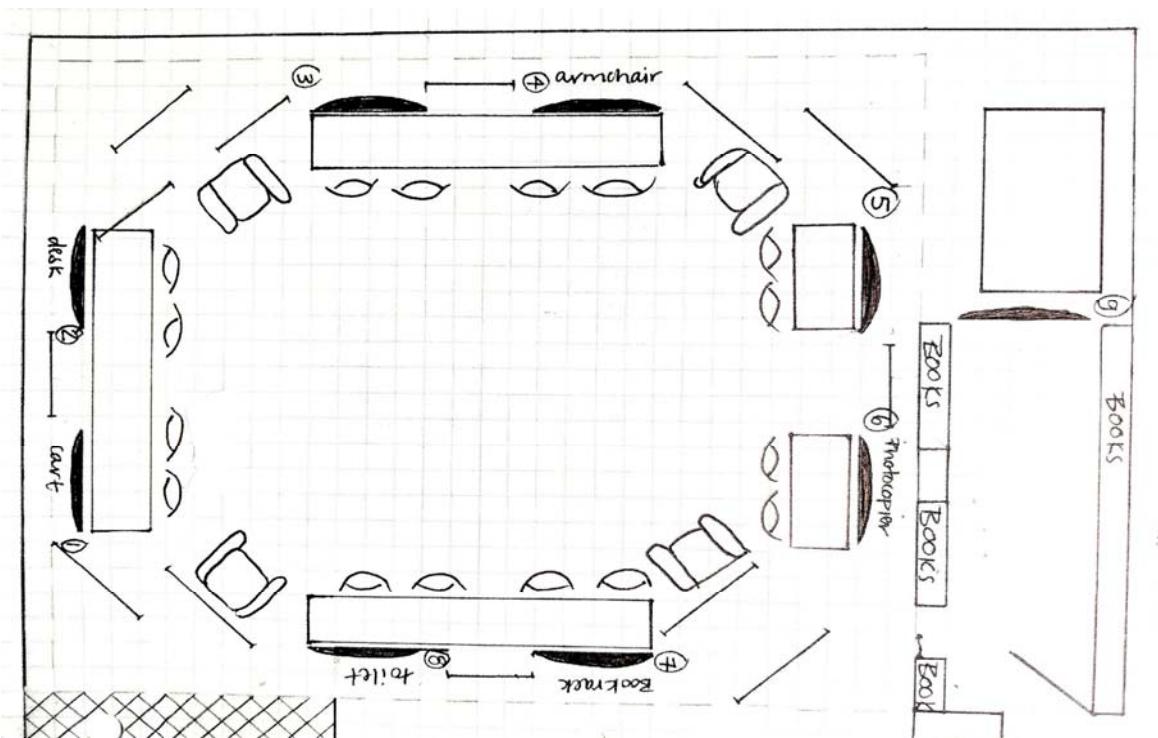


Image 7: Sketch. Final floor plan.

I also realised it would be far too complicated to situate these loops in space and time without using the Max software installed in the lab. I would need to hire a programmer.

THE EDIT

The editing process was a challenge. I had never created a piece like this, and although the process of creating assembly, rough cut, fine cut, and locked picture did apply, I was not sure how to create these video loops. My editor was working in Premiere, and we went through a steep learning curve. We ended up creating an eight-window work screen to watch all of the loops in sync at once. I knew it would be important in this piece to have moments of emotional tension placed against mundane moments of release. We began by stringing together all the dialogue to slip in all the shots meant to inhabit the other screens. Shifting or cutting the footage from one loop would automatically put all the other loops out of sync, but the editor came up with an appropriate work flow to make this process as efficient as possible. It was a labour intensive and slow process.



Image 8: Screenshot. The eight-frame screen set-up used during editing.

Ultimately, we found our stride and the piece eventually took form, quite gracefully falling into place. We had created eight eighteen-minute loops. And the ninth screen? Well that was still a bit of a mystery.

SECOND PROJECTION TEST

I had now built screens that were very simple to hang, and along with my new laser distance measurer, getting all eight screens up in the right place was quickly done. With our loops very close to being locked, we had our second projection test. My programmer, Adiola Palmer, had created a program using Max software, and besides a small glitch with a plug-in that would not allow us to play the full resolution files, everything seemed to be working well. I had some people come in to watch the experience and give feedback, and I was pleased to hear that they were engaged by the content, and wanted to stay. One person likened it to a video game where the idea of ‘completing it’ was at play – wanting to make sure you saw all of the footage and content. That is what kept you in

There was one unforeseen problem with the projected video loops, something I had not taken into account during the shoot – distance of actor from camera. The actors were restricted during the shoot in terms of their lateral movement in order to insure their whole body was always on screen, but I had not thought of the impact of their front/back movement. We shot on a 35mm lens, and on our small monitor during the shoot we did not notice that the actors’ size was changing as they moved even just a foot away or the space towards camera. As a result, when all of the characters were projected together on the screens, their scale was not consistent. Miriam, the librarian, who was mostly

behind a desk or behind her book cart was the biggest problem. She was dwarfed by the other actors. Dealing with this issue took a tremendous amount of time. We had to go through all the screens and all of the different shots that made up each loop, and resize the images in order to have them match in terms of their scale.



Image 9: Photo. Four of the eight screen during the second projection test.

THE NINTH SCREEN

The ninth screen was to be placed at the end of the hallway that served as an entry into the main space. I was creating the hallway by hanging blacks, with the same paper scrolls that inhabited the main space covering up most of the black. I would dress the space with large stacks of books lining both sides of the length of this hallway, notes and papers tucked inside for people to find.

This hallway entry into the main space was to be the beginning of the journey into *Miriam's World*. It would also act as the ending, as viewers would be forced back through in order to exit the exhibit. Of course, the experience of going through this hallway before and after the experience in the main space would be very different.

Originally, the ninth screen was to be a six-minute loop of Miriam sorting through piles and piles of books. After a time, her father's dead body would drop into frame and she would react in shock and fear, and then the loop would start again. This screen was intended to feel like a kind of fever dream, representing Miriam's emotional state. However, I ended up using the footage of the dead father's hanging legs in the loops created for the eight screens in the main space. I knew the image would lose its impact if I used it twice.

I hung the ninth screen during the second projection test, a scrim the same size as the other eight, suspended from a lighting stand. The projector I was using would run the loop from a laptop, independent of the other eight loops. I was hoping to rear-project so as to avoid having viewers walk into the throw of the projector. However, the projector beam was blinding as you walked into the space. The scrim, being a translucent material, did not block enough light. This was a problem I had not foreseen. Could I use front projection? There was not enough distance to get the size of image I needed – the librarian life size. This was an issue. What exactly was this ninth screen to be?

A few days after this projection test, during our last editing session, I had the thought of using an old school television on an AV cart in the hallway entrance space instead of the large scrim screen. It would force the viewers to lean in to see the video, whereas the projector I had originally imagined would force them to lean out so as not to get blinded by the beam of light. The footage would be the same footage, but the loop would not include the dead father's legs dropping into frame. It would be an endless loop of Miriam organizing books, a kind of Sisyphean task that she would have to endure, making order out of the chaos that surrounds her. The entrance space was actually a representation of her emotional state – she is a prisoner, stuck in the time when her father committed suicide. The hallway was becoming the garage where her father had hanged himself, with Miriam stuck inside, searching endlessly for the note her father never left. I decided to add objects you would find in a garage – garbage cans, lawn mowers tools, etc. Mixed in with his massive book collection, it would be a dense, cluttered and strange space.

This hallway area would feel more intimate than the main space. The scale would be more human. The claustrophobic feeling of a high ceiling and very lean hallway filled with clutter and books, with the relatively small television screen you had to get very close to in order to watch, would actually serve the piece very well.

I also had a flash of inspiration while watching an interview with Lis Rhodes, the artist and filmmaker. I'm not sure what triggered the thought, but I saw an image of the scrim intended for the ninth screen being draped over the AV cart with the television on it playing the loop of Miriam sorting the books. It would add another layer of obscurity to

what she was doing, another tactile layer for the viewer to get through in order to discover the content.

SOUND DESIGN

I am fascinated by sound and, as I mentioned in my introduction, my films have very delicate and complex soundscapes. I am actually more fascinated by the power of sound than I am with the power of image to evoke a feeling. Sound in this piece was an immense job, and would make a huge difference to the success or failure of the piece as a whole.

Much like with VR, sound in this space would be used as an editing tool, the viewer following sound around the space and looking at the content, you want them to when you want them to. The Transmedia lab is equipped with eight speakers, two in each corner, one just below the ceiling, and one on the floor. There is also a ninth speaker on the ceiling in the centre of the room. I could have sound from all corners of the space to create an enveloping soundscape.

There are many elements that make up the soundscape for *Miriam's World*. In the main space: dialogue from the film loops, ambient/atmosphere of the library – a combination of pipes, vents, air, creaking and other hummings and buzzings, sounds effects and foley. The only music in the piece is an aria from the opera *Rigoletto* by Verdi. The seven patrons on the screens all spontaneously begin to lip-sync and dance to it at a certain point, as Miriam looks on mystified and then delighted. |

I did try some voice over elements such as Miriam reading out some of the incident reports she had written, taken directly from the book. However, they felt heavy handed in this context, and seeing as I wanted to incorporate paper elements in the piece, I decided there was no real need for voice over. I could use this same content in written form, planted around the room.

An interesting, unforeseen element of multi-screen work came up in the sound spotting session having to do with footsteps. Where did characters go when they were not on screen? How long would their footsteps be heard in the space? Where were they going when they exited their screen? Back in space? Was it strange to hear them, but not see them? The sound designer and I decided to create a rule book for sound and movement in this world. When a character left a screen and did not soon after appear on another screen, we would have the footsteps recede back in space, back in the library until they disappeared. This also meant that just before a character came back onto a screen, we would hear footsteps approaching before the projected image appeared. This was an unexpected gift – sound was affecting the architecture of the space, literally adding depth to the library. Sound was creating another layer of my onion.

For the hallway space, I had originally planned to have Rigoletto reading aloud some of the notes he had left for Miriam. But now that the screen was a television, and the space designed to feel claustrophobic, I felt the booming voice of Rigoletto I had recorded during the shoot would feel overpowering. I wanted something subtler. The hallway

would use the same palette of ambient elements as the main space, but in a heightened way. Water in pipes, air in vents and creaking floors would make the space feel uncomfortable. The ambience created would be put through filters so the sound would feel insular and close, what Steve McQueen refers to as “claustrophobic silence in which you can hear your own breathing.”²³ The soundscape for the hallway space would sit inside a vacuum, in contrast with the open echoing quality of the sound in the main space.

²³ Elwes, Catherine. *Installation and the Moving Image* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2015), 47. From - Steve McQueen in conversation with Patricia Bickers (1997) Art Monthly, 202. <http://www.artmonthly.co.uk/magazine/site/article/steve-mcqueen-interviewed-by-patricia-bickers-dec-jan-96-97>

CONCLUSIONS

This intensive hands-on exploration into space and story has proven to be very satisfying. The result is a piece that is a visceral, immersive experience of what it is like to be inside this librarian's world, haunted by her dead father and surrounded by a cast of very strange library patrons. It is my hope that once the piece is inhabited with viewers, they will become the other patrons in the library, watching, talking, touching, reading, and writing. The piece requires participants to work and I look forward to seeing the elements up and functioning in the Transmedia lab filled with both projected and real library patrons.

MOVING MIRIAM'S WORLD INTO THE WORLD

I have thought a lot about where this piece belongs moving forward. Holly Willis speaks about the spaces that house installations by stating:

While some video installation projects are merely resituated cinematic works that use the gallery or museum space to accrue high art status, many other installation video works share the historical avant-gard's desire to disrupt the power of the museum by sparking insights that illuminate the contradictions implicit in creating a locus for art that is separate from the outside world. Installation art, by its very being, calls into question the location of art, if only in bringing to the foreground the space in which it is found, and the space viewers need to traverse in order to experience it.²⁴

For me, creating *Miriam's World* has been about taking moving image out of a traditional theatre setting and placing it in a space between art and the real world, but I am still placing it in a university media lab. The boundary has not been pushed very far. Ultimately, what kind of space right for this piece?

²⁴ Willis, Holly. *New Digital Cinema Reinventing the Moving Image* (London: Wallflower Press, 2005), 79.

Olafur Eliasson argues:

...in a museum, the framework is clearly present. museums offer structures and communications that affect how viewers experience art. I don't necessarily go against the signature of the museum, but I do try to make it explicit. I'd like people to become aware that the museum is also a construct, that the artworks and experiences are relative to the users and to how the space is programmed. exhibiting in public space always entails working in a participatory way, but I actually don't really distinguish between the two; public spaces also have their own regulatory premises, their hidden or visible ideologies, and the museum is very much part of the world – entering a museum may even make you come closer to the world.²⁵

Look to Janet Cardiff's *40 Part Motet*. These forty speakers are the only physical elements that make up the piece, but the piece has been placed in many different kinds of spaces. I saw it at The Cloisters Museum in New York where it was set up in the Fuentiduena Chapel, somehow appropriate given the religious and spiritual nature of the choral music being played. But it has also been set up inside art galleries such as the Art Gallery of Ontario. I wonder if the religious 'spiritual' surrounding I saw it in coloured my experience of the piece. What was the impact of that setting? Would it have been as moving, or a different experience in a secular space?

It was my original intention to place the larger piece I am working towards in an actual library, creating a virtual library with virtual patrons inside an actual library. I now wonder if a library is the right home for this piece, or if a gallery setting would be more appropriate. There is something wonderful about being able to create a library in a space that is not intended for that purpose, a surprise when entering the space, that it has been so greatly transformed.

²⁵ Nina Azzarello, "Interview with artist Olafur Eliasson." Designboom, Feb 16, (2015). <https://www.designboom.com/art/olafur-eliasson-interview-artist-designboom-02-16-2015/>

Creating *Miriam's World* has been a life altering process for me. I have been making narratives films with such intense drive for so long; it takes so much determination, focus, and time to get these films produced, I feel now that I have been inside a bubble. I never considered changing the form of these works. I never even saw there was a possibility to take my passion for film into a multi-media practice. It has been immensely liberating to work on this multi-screen multi-media piece, to think of story last, to focus instead on world, space, touch, feel, and emotion and deemphasize narrative structure and plot. Although this practice of multi-channel installation feels very fresh to me, with its roots in the recent past, I was delighted to discover a long history of spreading stories and content across many frames. As Jeremy Bubb describes in *Back to the future: Multi-image screen narrative in a digital age*: “This approach, of extending visual narrative beyond the parameters of the frame, is in many ways similar to that of the painters of the fourteenth century, as they also considered the restrictions of the single frame as inadequate to represent their stories.”²⁶

I have felt the restrictions of a single frame for my whole career as a filmmaker, and in some cases those boundaries elevate the work, but it is liberating to know that there is also a different way of presenting moving image. With the completion of *Miriam's World*, it feels like I have come full circle, from my roots in theatre design, to filmmaker, to video installation artist.

²⁶ Jeremy Bubb, “Back to the future:Multi-image screen narrative in a digital age.” Journal of Media Practice, Volume 13 Number 1, (2012), 57.

I have continued to work on the feature film script of *The Incident Report* throughout the creation of *Miriam's World* and I feel myself approaching problems of story and structure differently. This research and creative experience has given me permission to think more openly about the works I am creating, to explore form, and tailor it to best express the ideas, images, and emotions I hope to explore with any given piece.

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World Stage Harbourfront, 2016.
Multi-media dance piece.