THE CLOCK
by Christina Speligene
Narrative Studio, May 13, 2009
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Time present time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable
— T.S. Eliot

My sound installation, THE CLOCK, explores one woman’s attempt to reclaim the past through an inanimate object. In the search to find a mantle clock reminiscent of her childhood in post Dust-Bowl Oklahoma, a narrative unfolds revealing a complex layer of hope, expectation and loss. In trying to reclaim a piece of childhood, the process and experiences shed light on vulnerability. The struggle is anything but mechanical. THE CLOCK is a study of the contrast between mechanical precision and human frailty. At its core, the sound installation merges habitual methodical time with expansive nostalgia.

After college, I moved to Manhattan to work in graphic design and had the name of a woman known for letting Southerners stay on her couch. The first time we met to discuss the possibility of being a houseguest, I was at ease with her slow, deliberate way of speaking, slight accent, and attention to detail. Despite a successful career as an executive secretary and owning an apartment in Manhattan, her Oklahoma roots are never far away. Her personal history informed the beginnings of my piece, specifically a story about the search and eventual purchase of a clock similar to the one she grew up with. To better understand the impact of a clock in a home without indoor plumbing it is
worth a look at its historical setting. In his book *The Worst Hard Time*, Tim Egan writes of Oklahomans during this time. “Their is a story of survival, of perseverance, of the most corrosive poverty. ‘Sodworkers’ trying to farm damaged grasslands without rain or proper soil. Most of the Dust Bowlers didn't even have electricity. They ate things like tumbleweeds — salted and canned — or road kill, cooked over an open fire.” Most Americans are familiar with the film adapted from John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath*, set in dust-bowl Oklahoma, as well as photographs by Dorothea Lange. Both portray the tragic circumstances of sharecroppers, displaced families, and migrant workers in stark black and white. Because her images were distributed free to newspapers across the country, they became icons of the era. In my own work, I chose a scattered layer of red soil and gusts of wind to evoke a dry landscape and give the piece a geographical context.

THE CLOCK falls under the category “art installation,” or more specifically “sound installation.” Robin Minard, a Canadian composer and artist, defines it as “a term used to describe a wide variety of interdisciplinary art making . . . adopted with reference to any number of works that in some way integrate the element of sound — generally in a non-conventional manner — and which may otherwise be hard to categorize. In sound installation, there is a consideration of relationships to be expressed between the audio, visual and/or architectural elements of the work and secondly between the sound and the space for which the work is conceived as well as between the sound, the space and the observer.” THE CLOCK illustrates these three relationships. The audio and video share a balance, inhabit a graceful all-white space and serve up clues for the viewer.
The visual portion of my installation was influenced by American assemblage artist Joseph Cornell. “By collecting and carefully juxtaposing found objects in small, glass-front boxes, Cornell created visual poems in which surface, form, texture, and light play together. Using things we can see, Cornell made boxes about things we cannot see: ideas, memories, fantasies, and dreams.” ⁴ His box construction 11 x 17 1/2 x 5 1/4 inches titled *Space Object Box: “Little Bear, etc.”* (mid-1950s-early 1960s) in the Guggenheim Museum, is part of a *Winter Night Skies* series which includes fragments of celestial maps of the northern sky. Art Critic J. Blessing explains how the fragment contains Ursa Minor (known as “Little Bear”) as well as personification of hand-colored stars. The blue cork ball and the ring suggest the moon and its orbit; their movement along the two metal rods alludes to the unending cycle of celestial change. The toy block with a horse on its face is probably a punning reference to Pegasus, a square constellation. ⁵ Like Cornell, my three-dimensional assemblage is theme-based and rooted in nostalgia. I adopted similar size and format and borrowed from his tribute boxes (made for movie stars) several shrine qualities. My box contains clock references, diagrams, personal artifacts and trinkets evocative of childhood.

I was recently introduced to the international work of husband and wife team Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, known for their audio installations. “Since the early 1990s, Cardiff and Bures Miller’s experimental art has been a fascinating exploration of how sound affects and shapes our experience. It has shifted our attention away from art
as a primarily visual experience and an experience of the here and now (art as a specific object), to art as a multi-sensorial experience where sound sculpts space, and memory and reverie play an essential role: we are paradoxically transported away from the here and now, in order to achieve a heightened awareness of our bodies and being in the here and now. They create poetic, ambiguous, and fractured narratives that investigate desire, intimacy, love, loss, and memory, making reference in their works to the world of film, theater, and spectacle, as well as to the ways in which technology affects our consciousness.⁶ In their sound installation *Opera for a Small Room* they created a chaotic room filled with 42 speakers, tables, books and records. Speakers emit opera, pop music a man shuffling albums, a train, rain, and a chandelier. Viewers cannot enter the room; rather they must peep in through windows and cracks making shadows in the ambient lighting. THE CLOCK, albeit on a much smaller scale, is meant to serve a similar purpose.

The looping and layering techniques of sound collage artists Gavin Bryars further inspiration. In Bryars’s “Jesus’ Blood never failed me yet,” a pre-taped gospel song sung by a street person is looped over piano and organ music.⁷ The rawness of the vocals against the looped rhythms conveys an unexpected upbeat melancholy. In addition I researched pioneers in sound collage like David Byrne and Brian Eno, Cabaret Voltaire and Alvin Lucier (specifically, “I am Sitting in a Room”) which helped give me an understanding of how to treat the words and music as a whole.
From the start, The International Storytelling Festival (2005) informed this project. Rather than writing my own narrative, I saw value in using an existing story told by a native speaker. As their web site states, “Stories are the narratives of life, spanning the centuries and connecting the generations, our hopes and dreams.” The original story, very long and elaborate, was in the storytelling vein. I later pulled out key sections and words more appropriate for sound collage. Though at times tedious in its retelling, I wanted to preserve the homespun delivery which kept pace with the ticking clock heard in the background of the audio. The narrative formed the skeleton of my project and the skins kept changing.

In choosing how to best execute THE CLOCK, I wanted to present a story rooted in nostalgia and hint at an underlying complexity. Nostalgia has been defined as a psychopathological condition affecting individuals who are uprooted, whose social contacts are fragmented, who are isolated and who feel totally frustrated and alienated. It was first described in the 17th century, and was a problem of considerable interest to physicians in the 18th and 19th centuries. First coined in 1678 by Johannes Hofer of Basel, the word nostalgia was derived from *nostos* (return to one’s native land) and *algos* (pain or distress). It was meant “to signify the pain which the sick person feels because he is not in his native land.” Through THE CLOCK, I wanted to convey this aspect of personal brokenness as well as the physical factual nature of shattered glass.
The design decisions that make up the installation speak directly to the contrasting elements of automated vs. emotional. Editing choices highlighted content and quickened the pace. Mechanical sounds helped embellish the “clockness.” Portions of music (Frankie Yankovich’s “Tick Tock Polka,” Hank Thompson’s “Oklahoma Hills,” and Joseph Haydn’s “Symphony No. 101 in D Major,” (also known as “The Clock Symphony”) helped cement the theme and alter the mood. This looped.aif audio file is played through speakers above the installation. Below hangs the glass-front box containing the book *Chime Clock Repair* (Clockmakers Newsletter 1989) by Steven G. Conover. It is exhibited opened to a spread containing strike mechanism diagrams. These hard, cold line drawings contrast with vocal inflections, music and sounds. The book rests within a layer of wind-blown soil, which represents the Oklahoma dust bowl. The box suggests a precious object, and implies something lavish in the middle of dirt, which is where the narrative began. More specifically, it harkens to the original Herman Miller Clock Co. inside a tiny house on the “side of the road.” Interestingly, this maker’s clocks are in the permanent collection of The Museum of Modern Art.

THE CLOCK began as a video piece with 45 minutes of original footage. It was edited to 24 minutes but suffered from the talking head syndrome despite intercut artifacts and visuals. Subsequently, the piece took a *This American Life* turn, which lacked my own interpretation and message of “clock as a metaphor.” The final incarnation, a sound installation, was the most successful in achieving this goal.
THE CLOCK poses the universal question: Is it possible to reconstruct the past and subvert the outcome? Of course we know we cannot alter time but this installation addresses the passage of time and the impact of a clock on a deprived life. THE CLOCK offers an interpretation of what it means to be so driven by the past that it dictates events and experiences in the present and future. THE CLOCK’s essence is a timepiece that is a talisman that transcends time and represents more than a ticking contraption on an Ethan Allen shelf. It is a reflection of both aspects of nostalgia — the experience of pleasure and pain. As T.S. Eliot says, “time is unredeemable.” It is impossible to reclaim the past through an inanimate object or alter the outcome. But in the trying, there exists a struggle that is anything but mechanical. St. Augustine’s *Theory of Time* best expresses this struggle: “We connect to the past through memory, the future through expectation and the present through attention.” ¹¹ THE CLOCK successfully bridges the past, present and future.
ENDNOTES


4. Joseph Cornell “Boxes”


6. Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller “Press”
http://www.cardiffmiller.com (Accessed April 24, 2009)

7. Gavin Brayers, *Jesus’ Blood Never Failed Me* 

8. International Storytelling Center “Home”
http://www.storytellingcenter.net/about/about.htm (Accessed April 1, 2009)


10. BMJ medical publication of the year “Nolstalgia”
http://www.bmj.com/cgi/content/extract/323/7311/496 (Accessed April 28, 2009)

Christina Rossetti was an English poet who lived from 1830-1894. In this poem, she wants her loved one to remember her after death. The word “remember” is shared five times, bringing attention to the importance of holding onto those memories, but the tone changes at the end. She then gives her loved one the permission to move on after her death. She hopes to be remembered, but she doesn’t want those memories to cause sadness to those she leaves behind. The form of Remember is a Petrarchan Sonnet. Christina Rossetti was an English poet who lived from 1830-1894. In this poem, she wants her loved one to remember her after death. The word “remember” is shared five times, bringing attention to the importance of holding onto those memories, but the tone changes at the end.