

# Spectacle and Subjectivity: the work of Judith Barry

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In the summer of 1991, commuters waiting on the platform of London's Hammer-smith Underground Station found themselves being addressed from the windows of a kiosk by large disembodied heads. These video portraits narrate stories of dispossession and cultural exclusion. They are manifestations of a larger project, developed over ten years through texts, videos, installations and exhibition designs by artist Judith Barry.

Voyeurism, spectacle, the power of display and the seductive apparatus of projection have been central to her work. Through a range of formal strategies that co-opt critical analysis, architectural form and cinematic spectacle she has explored a range of interconnecting themes: desire as a cultural product; the circulation of signs in the transformed landscape of urban redevelopment; the formation of the subject in the spatial and social apparatus of viewing. Recent projects display the current focus of her work: the inscription of history in the spaces of the city.

Barry belongs to the generation of artists who define their practice in relation to cultural theory as much as through aesthetic issues. She shares with contemporaries such as Krzysztof Wodiczko, Hans Haacke or Jenny Holzer, a strongly focused concern with the institutionalisation of power and the strategies by which cultural hegemony is reproduced and naturalised in the contemporary landscape. Building on a legacy directly traceable to the work of the Situationist International and the British Independent Group, Barry addresses the specific intersection of contemporary architecture and urban planning with theoretical questions formulated in the semiotic and psychoanalytically informed texts of contemporary criticism.

However unlike other artists for whom Baudrillard or Guy Debord provide a

platform from which to embrace the notion of the simulacrum, Barry's critical project insists on the existence of the *real* as a necessary point of reference within the so-called 'society of the spectacle'. From Barry's perspective (and the same might be said of Wodiczko, Haacke etc.) Baudrillard's notion of the simulacrum has a dangerous potential as an instrument in the rationalizing language of corporate entrepreneurial rhetoric. Much of her recent work focuses on an urban landscape transformed in the 1980s by developers and architects who cavalierly disregarded the actuality of lived experience in the spaces they created. The disorientation and displacement of the individual effected by mirrored surfaces, gaudy facades and guarded atriums parallels the evacuation of the individual subject's real body from Baudrillard's simulacrum. As Barry states, 'Baudrillard is the perfect philosopher for developers, because he dissolves the body.'

Barry's work also continues a tradition of modernism which took the city as the primary site both of modern life and of the possibility for radical intervention on the part of the artist activist. Her training in architecture and design combined with critical theory early on in her artistic practice. It was Walter Benjamin's analysis of architectural form that defined it as a site where the cultural dynamics essential for consumption were produced; further, it articulated the perversities of the engagement of a mass imaginary with commodity culture. Not surprisingly, traces of his arcades' project of the 1930s, a paradigmatic analysis of space as cultural formation, show up in Barry's 1980-81 video, *Casual Shopper*, which investigates the sleights of display used to excite desire in a West Coast shopping mall. Conflating the domains of public consumption and private seduction Barry's video traces the movements of a couple, both models, through the continually displaced focus of each other's gaze in the synthetic spaces of the mall. The space of shopping becomes the space of their unappeasable desire.

Echoing the analytic techniques of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott-Brown's *Learning from Las Vegas* Barry carried out a study for a real intervention in a shopping mall in Palo Alto, California, where she suggested subtle reorderings of all the signage and window displays. Though unrealised, this project gave her intimate familiarity with the elements which circulate as signs within that designed environment and their engagement with the dynamics of desire.

Barry's interest in issues informing current architectural practice and the design of contemporary space coincided with an art world interrogation of the production of subjectivity as an essential component of art activity. By the time of her 1985 piece, *In the Shadow of the City Vampire*, she began to investigate certain

themes also evident in the work of artists such as Dan Graham, Jeff Wall and Barbara Kruger. They shared a concern with spatial positioning, wishing to examine the interactive conditions of spectatorship within social systems of signification as deployed through architectural means and through the 'apparatus' of representation.

*In the Shadow of the City Vampire*, Barry uses a two sided screen on which she projects images of a suburban parking lot and a Manhattan apartment building. Both night-time shots, these images have window into which short film sequences, glimpses of figures enacting fragmented narratives, are projected. These static and moving images are hypnotic, irresistible yet alienating. Condensing the site of viewing with the urban planner's schematic presentation of the spectacle, this representation of voyeurism becomes its enactment. In opposition to the Baudrillardian schizophrenic subject, ruptured and split across the endlessly refracting surface of the simulacrum, Barry proposes a vampiristic subject, driven to a ceaselessly consuming spectatorship.

The implication of the viewer into the complex set of relations put in motion by the piece, makes it impossible to occupy any stable, fixed or resolved position in relation to the image. This destabilisation of the subject has been a conspicuous device in the work of a generation of women artists, strategic in a feminist subversion of the conventions of representation. Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman and Jenny Holzer, to name three definitive practitioners, have systematically attacked the fictive authority of both artist and viewer through the use of images and linguistic means which call attention to the production of subjectivity.

Barry also shares concerns with artist Victor Burgin, whose interest in the cinematic codes of voyeurism, and almost fetishistic engagement with the obsessional terms of Hitchcockian fantasy, are equally self-conscious in their manipulation of visual devices. Both Barry and Burgin are relentless in their reworking of the scopic drive and a rechannelling of the unconscious engagement with visual pleasure into an unstable and disorienting confrontation with its production.

*Model for Stage and Screen*, shown at the Venice Biennale in 1988, comprises an antechamber leading to a chamber filled with fog and bathed in green light. Moving between these areas the spectator 'hallucinates', projecting an uncontrollable retinal after-image. Unlike Burgin, for whom sexual fantasy is a central subject matter, and for whom the image is the means of deploying the fantasmatic device, Barry returns continually to the domain of the social, usually urban environment.

First shown as part of the Projects series at MOMA, the 1986 piece *Echo*

investigated the trajectory of the architectural inventions of early modernism and the implicit social liberation they promised. Beginning with images of a Johnsesque atrium in Manhattan, whose glass and steel frames trace their lineage to that architectural icon, the Crystal Palace of 1851, and again using video projections and screens, Barry explored the subject relations produced in the mirroring activity of glass architecture. An archetypal businessman trapped within a Miesian glass house stares out through its gridded wall in hopeless frustration, a loop of Narcissistic relations tying him to the echo of a corporate world. Architecture serves here not as metaphor or symbol of techno-corporate space, but as the means by which power relations are established. The crux of Barry's premise becomes clear here: that the structural features of contemporary architecture function as the structuring apparatus of a particular form of subjectivity. Barry eschews the old fashioned rhetoric of alienation as well as the slick gloss of postmodern simulation both of which produce passivity; one through a freezing of the will in the face of futility; the other through a belief that there are no successful strategies of intervention. By contrast, her work continues to argue passionately for attention, criticism and action within the social sphere.

More recent works, such as *First and Third*, which was part of the Whitney Biennial in 1987, made explicit the investigation of cultural hegemonic practices, which works like *Echo* addressed more generally. Rather than deal with types (the businessman, the shopper), *First and Third*, used specific narratives of individuals whose oral histories (albeit edited and re-presented by actors) bespeak the experience of immigration and race relations in the United States. With the projection apparatus concealed in a trompe l'oeil design, these talking heads in the darkened entry to the stairwell at the Whitney inserted their presence into that institutional framework with pointed effectiveness. In the manner of Krzysztof Wodiczko's projections on facades, which similarly make use of juxtapositions of institutions, images and, to use Roland Barthes' term, the third meaning produced in the interaction, these heads appeared as if from nowhere, their technical method of production as effaced in the corridors of the Museum, as their histories are systematically excluded from mainstream narratives of contemporary America.

*First and Third*, embodies a subtle, but implicit critique of the very institution which exhibits the work. Barry has engineered similar subversions of artworld structures and policies through her exhibition designs. Often made in collaboration with architect Ken Saylor, she has designed exhibitions at the New Museum of Contemporary Art and Clocktower in New York and the ICA in Boston. Her

approach to the design and installation of shows such as *Damaged Goods*, 1986 or *Impressario: Malcolm McLaren and the British New Wave*, 1988 at the New Museum has its roots in the early work and exhibition strategies of Independent Group members Richard Hamilton, Eduardo Paolozzi and the Smithson's; and the Archigram group. By creating dynamic and unexpected juxtapositions of objects and images, and constructing interactive environments Barry demonstrates her debt to the IG's cross-bred formulations between art, pop culture, architecture and technology. Her grounding in their strategies is a practical one; for one of the Clocktower's exhibitions on art and pop in 1987, she made a full scale restoration of the IG's ground breaking *This is Tomorrow* installation.

At its most expansive and ambitious, Barry's work takes on the ethics of urban planning and redevelopment in historical terms. *Adam's Wish*, installed at the World Financial Centre in 1988, and in Hartford at Real Art Ways in 1989, investigated what Barry terms the 'disappearance of iconography from contemporary architecture'; that is the associative images and stories which traditionally accrue to built forms, features which ground the individual subject in some experience of identification through which meaning is produced. Meaning could be generated through proportion and a sense of human scale; through the relation of elements within a space to points of view and alignment along sightlines from perspectival centres. It could be evoked by actual elements of decoration and statuary providing fragments to be recognised, assimilated, enjoyed. Both the pleasure of imagination and the pleasure of the body were available in such a system, generally associated with classical architecture.

By emphasizing both the historicity of form and the location of subject experience within the body of the viewer, Barry asserts the necessity to consider *place* as the site of an interaction between history, property, community and subjective experience. *Adam's Wish* comprised an 'electronic fresco', an image projected upwards onto an oval screen which was hung beneath the dome of a corporation's headquarters. Engaging the observer's upward craning gaze is a fast edit journey of a man through space. The space is variously that of the city, the corporation, the body and the church - this everyman, or Adam (our generic, original, man/human) is himself transformed as he moves from the vaguely threatening plazas of New York's City Hall to re-emerge in Michaelangelo's Sistine Chapel. Announced by bolts of lightning - a sign of nature and a reference to the moment when the spark of life is passed by God to Adam - this brief sequence allows Barry to link the cycle of Adam's relation to actual space to a history of architectural iconography. Her contention is

that the loss of such imagery coincides with a loss of a '...sense of shared community, public vision and responsibility'.

The high tech production apparatus of Barry's work implements its sharply focused concerns with illusion and voyeurism, the seductive pleasures of looking as they are complicit with the effaced means of social control and manipulation. The loss of history which in turn subverts the real is *produced*, not incidental, and Barry's insistence on the reassertion of historical form as an essential element of subjective experience in contemporary life signals her intervention in the safe and stylish markets of both architectural design and contemporary art. Undermining the rhetoric of postmodern glibspeak celebrating the simulacrum, the work of Judith Barry continually questions its premises in her artistic practice, calling attention to the apparatuses of production of the social realm rather than celebrating the success of signs taken at the face value of their appearances.

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