



In conversation with Judith Barry

SIE SPIELT MIT GESCHLECHTERROLLEN UND MIT DEM, WAS GEGENWÄRTIG ALS „NORMAL“ GILT: IM GESPRÄCH MIT DER MULTIDISZIPLINÄREN KÜNSTLERIN JUDITH BARRY.

BY KATJA HORVAT

Her oeuvre often focuses on sociology and political science. Barry always threatens a line between private and public. She plays with gender roles, perception and the current state of our „normal“ today. All her projects, may it be writing, installation work, video work, etc. intervene with the world we live in and chronicle personal experiences of the „subjects“ involved in a specific piece. Barry is interested in what is behind the surface. She is interested in breaking down the barriers and giving a voice to those who don't have one.

Her work is represented in the collections of MoMA, Whitney Museum, DIA Foundation, Generali Foundation, Mumok, Centre Pompidou, La Caixa, MACBA, FRAC Lorraine,

Goetz Collection, among many others.

We talked to the artist about her most significant projects, why and how they were made, and what the story is behind them.

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For a start, who is Judith Barry?

That is hard to answer. I don't see myself as being a unified 'I,' rather at any given moment I am the effect of a variety of experiences – experiences that are always changing and evolving, 'I' am constantly in flux. But of course, I have

certain core beliefs and ideas about myself that I return to again and again.

In my artworks, I have been most interested in experimenting; hence I have deliberately tried not to have a signature style. Both the form and the content of each of my works emerge from a set of questions that I ask, always different for each project, in relation to ideas I want to investigate. Often, people don't recognize a work of mine as having been made by me.

So to recognize the core of your work, let's now break down a few of your most significant projects. "Imagination, dead imagine" is a video/sculpture dating back to 1991, that was revitalized in 2017. In this particular piece, you play with people reactions to certain ticks, which are more or less unpleasant. What made you want to do this piece in the first place?

"Imagination, dead imagine" addresses many different questions that were percolating in the art/culture world around 1989 – 1990. The work premiered in early 1991 in The Savage Garden, curated by Dan Cameron at the Fundacion 'le Caixa' in Madrid. The title is from a Samuel Beckett story. Here is a brief list, in no particular order, of some of the subjects the work addresses.

The body:

Minimal Art and putting the body back into Minimal Art.

The mirrored structure is a reference to Robert Morris's mirrored cubes while the heads, although androgynous and somewhat de-gendered, often read as 'female,' and refer to feminisms. Meanwhile, the video wipe, which wipes clean these heads, is a reference to the indomitability of the human spirit as well as the AIDS epidemic. The substances pouring over the heads also refer to the body, in particular, the 'abject' – defined as that which we make in our bodies, and expel, and even as we are decomposing. See, Julia Kristeva's book, Powers of Horror.

Painting:

The 'pours,' both liquids and bugs, are meant to function as a form of painting with video. This work was produced when large paintings, mostly by men, dominated the art world. For me, special effects makeup, produced for horror films is also a form of painting, but the output is in media, not canvas. I also was referencing John Baldessari's challenge that video should function like a pencil, like drawing, and must become ubiquitous.

Psychological effects:

In addition to the 'abject' mentioned above, I was exploring the 'uncanny' (Freud) as that which is both familiar and unfamiliar, simultaneously. The face is the most familiar visual referent, and the question was how to produce an experience for the viewer that was both utterly compelling as well as completely estranging; additionally transgression and transgressiveness –

both that which is excessive and that which is repressed – were also important in choosing the substances that pour over the heads. All of this can return to haunt us, and the endlessly looping structure of "Imagination, dead imagine" was designed to underscore this relation as that which returns to haunt us. At the time, I was also considering Gothic horror in literature and film where you can not 'unsee' what you have already seen. So the five sides of the cube structure (there is a top view as well as four sides) showing parts of the head, and the wipes, along with the substances, were all chosen because they could evoke these psychological experiences.

I was also questioning a contemporary notion of the 'sublime,' even then, also a time of perpetual trauma and endless war, and the horror this produces, but from which we cannot turn away. Sadly, this was as true when this work was produced as it is today: the 1990-91 Gulf War, Iraqi occupation of Kuwait...

What made you want to bring this piece back?

One of the issues for me about showing any work of art, new or old, is the question, "How is it relevant to what is happening today?" I keep this question foremost in my thinking when considering what to exhibit, and how to exhibit an artwork, by making a context where queries around the present can be foregrounded. I think "Imagination, dead imagine" has a lot to say about our contemporary moment as many of the issues that it addresses are still with us today, although some of these issues have taken very different turns than might have been predicted in 1991. And of course, as an artist, I hope all my works would have something to contribute to our present moment.

What was the most surprising reaction you got from that particular work?

You mean with my recent show at Mary Boone Gallery in NYC?

Yes.

Many visitors read the work allegorically as a meditation on our current political moment in the US and elsewhere. Today, a political reading seems undeniable. Additionally, the question of the 'sublime' has arguably been re-contextualized as today it may be impossible to conceive of a contemporary 'sublime' as the 'horror' aspects that are part of the sublime experience are much harder to aestheticize now than they were in 1991.

Other viewers also remarked on the heads in the work as prefiguring some of the today's transgender issues. For instance, the heads were electronically stretched to conform to the horizontal shape of the cube, and this is partially why the heads look androgynous and don't necessarily fit into the category of either male or female. This reading is a bit different than in 1991 as androgyny usually resolved on the side of the feminine, and not as transgender.



“Not reconciled” is a series that explores the construction of subjectivity, history, and identity in countries and cultures around the world. In “...cairo stories” the focus was on more than 200 Cairo women. You talked to them in a span of 8 years. 8 years is a long time, how did the conversations change, how did the narrative change? How did the culture change?

I was invited to Cairo for the 2001 Cairo Biennial, and in many ways, “...cairo stories” found me. While there, I noticed that not only was I a stereotype of a Western tourist but that my status as a woman alone meant something different in Cairo than it does to the many women I meet from varying class backgrounds in NYC. In Cairo, all the women I met seemed to want to tell me their stories, even journalists who came to interview me revealed very personal things. I couldn’t figure out why? This was not the case when I was collecting stories for other iterations of “Not reconciled,” for example.

Finally, I began to understand that as a woman, traveling alone, I represented something unusual, someone who might be seen as not having a particular point of view, whose identity, especially at this moment in Cairo, wasn’t fixed or easily ascribable to a particular cultural milieu, and certainly not to a judgmental point of view from an Egyptian societal perspective. As an outsider, it was a good bet that I was liberal and liberated: two things in short supply for women all through the so-called Middle East. It was safer to confide in me than in an Egyptian

from a similar class or social stratum. I also began to realize that some of these women thought that I might be able to help them because they (at that time) still looked to the West for direction, especially regarding women’s rights. I was also perceived as possessing some survival skills, skills that enabled me to create my own identity as an artist, and as a woman. In Cairo, the unasked questions were what might be applicable from my experiences to theirs.

My heritage is Arab, but I have never lived in an Arab country. Every time I visit the Orient, no matter the religion, I feel like I stepped into a different world. The world I know about, I have read about, I kind of am a part of, but in regards to all the facts and my heritage, being there, being part of or just observing their lives, feels surreal and I can not wrap my head around their reality. Did you ever struggle with that? Struggle to understand the reality of their lives completely?

Yes absolutely. I struggled with all of that. Their reality is very different from our situation in North America and Western Europe.

While I was in Cairo over all those years, the situation in Cairo changed dramatically as people became much more distrustful of the West, and especially visitors, after the US began bombing Iraq in 2003. I felt a wariness towards me in public areas, and taxis – the banter and humor that previously characterized my exchanges on



the street became increasingly subdued, not unfriendly, not dangerous, but not as trusting as before.

Another example of the dramatic transformation in Cairo during and after the US bombing in 2003, was the way the headscarf became a uniform for Cairene women. When I was first in Egypt, very few women were 'covered' with a headscarf of any kind. By December 2010 as I was finishing the interviews and preparing to shoot the project so it could premiere at the Sharjah Biennial, almost all the women in Cairo wore some form of a head covering when they went out. This didn't necessarily signify that they were suddenly religious, more it was an acknowledgment of how all of the things that they had expected from the West were now in doubt as the Western outcomes had not produced a society that could fully participate in the West and Egypt, simultaneously. They were straddling both cultures.

In many ways, I consider "...cairo stories" a collaboration with all the women I interviewed, with the many women who were my translators, and also with the many women who vetted the stories while we were deciding on which stories to shoot.

I saw my role less as an artist and more as a facilitator as these women wanted their stories told. I could not have undertaken this project without their participation.

All the women I worked with received an honorarium. Additionally, as many of the women did not want their names or photographs revealed, I honored their wishes. I used an old-fashioned tape recorder for the interview sessions, and we recorded the entire conversation – both in Arabic and English. In this way, the women vetting the stories could hear the context of our actual dialogue. In the end, we picked 15 stories to give a representative view of daily life in Cairo right up thru what then was called 'the revolution' in Tahir Square in January 2011.

Tell me more!

There are two stories from those days in Tahir Square, from women I interviewed previously, that were included in the stories we filmed. These 15 stories are from women with very different class backgrounds – something that is quite complex in Cairene society – and touch on many of the most important aspects of daily life in Cairo. I don't think the situation has changed much for women under the current military dictatorship – or so I am told by many of the women who participated in "...cairo stories." One of them compared the current situation in Cairo to time traveling back to the 1950s under Anwar Sadat, and suddenly waking up there: yes external factors are very different, but daily life is much the same, albeit much more expensive.



“Model for Stage and Screen,” another one of your notables pieces, is structured around the neurological fact that our senses (in this case, the sense of sight) are capable of deceiving us. What was your work process like? And how did you structure the piece in a way the viewer has very little control over what s/he sees?

One of the experiences I often try to produce in my installations is a sense of seeing things differently than you do in your normal life, such that you encounter space differently. This work was concerned with confronting the viewer with a film moment that would continue out into the space of the cinema even after the film was over. I considered different ways of thinking about what one sees or doesn't see to set up a polemical relationship. For instance, Orpheus's impetus for looking – remember he transgresses when he turns back to look at Eurydice – versus Oedipus and the moment of his insight – even though he has just blinded himself and can no longer see. I wanted to suspend the viewer in an experience between two ways of seeing.

I realized I needed to build a vision machine that might provoke different ways of seeing – not as a representation of the Orphic and the Oedipal, but as a place where the viewer would discover vision as something other than just or 'only' seeing. A place that could stage the impermanent relation you have with your own vision and where your vision no longer locates you at the center of your world. This led me to Johan Wolfgang von Goethe's early color experiments, and to retinal excitation – which is what produces vision 'affects' in a viewer.

The work has two chambers. The participant enters first into an anti-chamber and then into the main chamber, where in the process of trying to act upon this interior structure, instead the structure acts on you at precisely at those moments of activity where perception occurs. The main chamber is a stage whose hollow core leaves nothing to the imagination as the apparatus that produces the effect is clearly visible — just lights and fog. Nonetheless, it acts upon you at precisely those moments where you have decided that you are done with it. Just as your eyes become accustomed to the atmosphere, the room begins to slip away, insisting on the immateriality of its presence even as it affects you. Further, there can be no escape, as it catches you as you leave, turning you into a projector.

As you leave the main chamber, thinking you have escaped, your eyes involuntarily reproduce the complementary color of the fog/lights on the white walls of the anti-chamber; demonstrating that you are not in control of your vision. Instead, you are the effect of what you have seen – a blind spot in your mind's eye.

This work was first exhibited in Rome, in “Non in Codice,” curated by Carol LeWitt and Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev in 1987.

Let's now go way back to “Casual Shopper.” You started working on that piece in 1979 while still in college, right?



Yes. “Casual Shopper” was inspired by three things. The first was the realization that there could be a female ‘flaneuse’ après Walter Benjamin’s ‘flaneur.’ Remember Walter Benjamin’s “Arcades” project brought Charles Baudelaire’s “Painter of Modern Life” essay (1863) into the popular academic discourse. Passerbyers became ‘flaneurs’ as they found and lost themselves strolling through new forms of reflective architectural space, and they could suddenly recognize themselves differently than had ever before been possible as they could choose to inhabit many different identities while in the passageways, and simultaneously suffer the alienation that such possibilities produce. These psychological experiences were usually described as pertaining only to men, but in “Casual Shopper,” the woman character is the ‘flaneuse’ and experiences similar feelings.

The second was the realization that this woman’s ‘gaze’ could produce a cinematic narrative structure, thus countering Laura Mulvey’s famous observation about classic HW (Hollywood) film – that men ‘act’ and women (only) ‘appear’ in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975). In classical HW cinema – the hero’s gaze controls the narrative and only he is able to act. When the woman appears on the screen, all the action stops, they kiss, and then she ‘disappears,’ and then the action resumes when the hero does something such as solve the crime or kill the bad guys or ride off into the sunset. In “Casual Shopper,” these relationships are reversed. It is the woman protagonist whose gaze controls the action as we see everything through her eyes, and from her point of view. She is in charge of the narrative. When she

kisses the man, he is the one who ‘disappears.’

The third was that around the time that I was making “Casual Shopper,” many feminists were not sure that visual pleasure could be experienced from a ‘feminist perspective’ within a cinematic or even a physical space. One reason I wanted to make “Casual Shopper” is that I thought women did enjoy visual pleasure. Now we know that this is the case, but back in 1979, this issue was contested.

On a more narrative/descriptive level, “Casual Shopper” is about people who shop casually, those who go to the mall just to browse, at their leisure, when there is nothing better to do. It is also a love story, but a love story that never advances beyond that which can be imagined as the viewer is never sure if the male character is real or not. And the love story is never actually consummated either because the male character keeps disappearing precisely in the moment of the kiss. The woman protagonist does solve the mystery of the narrative, but not in a way that is necessarily expected as the narrative is about the pleasure of desire, and this pleasure plays out again and again as she returns to this prosaic scene where he disappears. Yes, demands are still exchanged, but her desire keeps her circulating endlessly because desire can never be satiated, by definition, as Jacques Lacan so eloquently wrote. And in this way, as a viewer, you share in this fantasy.

There is also no escape from the shopping mall either – which was constructed from many different stores around San Francisco and Palo Alto. For me, the architectural space

of the shopping mall is a kind of phantasmagorical construct from which there is also no exit. The narrative drive of “Casual Shopper” was to heighten the sense of entrapment in this alluring cage.

How challenging was it to work on topics of sex, as a female artist, all these years ago?

It wasn't difficult to work on these issues. It was exciting! All the questions that became part of the discourse around representation and sexuality were just germinating. These were shared interests among many women artists, and some men, too. In 1979 there were not that many opportunities for women in galleries and museums, but there were opportunities in dance, performance art, and film/video as these forms were more marginal, and hence more available to women. Just a few years later, by the mid-1980's, women artists including Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman, Jenny Holzer, and many others were becoming known and had gallery/museum shows. Gradually, these issues entered into the dominant art world discussions and informed what became known as postmodernism(s).

Do you think women today, when working with sexuality, get questioned and boxed-in more than when male artists do it? I feel like a man can still get away with a lot more, even now in 2017.

Yes, that is still the case, and may be even more so when a work by a woman artist produces a controversy or upsets more entrenched ways of understanding sexual and social politics. I can think of many current examples. Even in “Casual Shopper,” it is now possible to wonder if the woman protagonist might be a stalker? However, such a reading misses the phantasy elements in the narrative, in particular, if the male character does not exist, then he is in no danger. More broadly, and reflecting on the recent US Presidential election of Donald Trump as president: I think he is the answer to your question of ‘just how much a man can still get away with in 2017?’

