

Judith Barry's Video Installations: hunger for images and construction of meaning

The question raised by Judith Barry's work has always been how to engage actively, collectively and critically with images, while at the same time acknowledging a dimension that cannot be rationally recuperated. Her installation *In the Shadow of the City... Vampire* (1982-1985) involves slides projecting onto both sides of a double-sided screen, in which there are further film projections in two windows. Since the renaissance, the window has served to frame the perspective of the dominating, centred subject. Turning the windows into screens, Barry casts the viewer into the urban image world—looking in towards a vacant shopping mall, and the windows of a high-rise apartment building, alternates with looking out from interiors. Rather than passively consuming images, the viewer is induced to actively construct meaning from fragments. The vampire of the title—offering a possible viewing position—combines an insatiable hunger for images with the detachment of untimeliness, as one who crosses epochs.

The image occurs as an event in an architectural space traversed by bodies. In *The Work of the Forest* (1992) it is the bodily, spatial and temporal experience of the work that undercuts totalisation. Videos are projected onto a three-part circular wooden pavilion carved with Art Nouveau patterns, recalling the central atrium of the house Victor Horta designed, using African woods and motifs, for Baron van Eetvelde, the Belgian Minister of the Congo. The house was finished in 1897, the year when, at the instigation of van Eetvelde, Art Nouveau architects were invited to contribute to the Congo pavilion of the Brussels Universal Exposition. In Barry's work, which also recalls a pavilion at such an exhibition, or a display at what was formally the Museum of the Congo at Tervuren, the panoramic is associated with colonialism, whose other face is an extreme interiority, reflected both in the novels of Proust and the Art Nouveau home. Barry brings the African voice and reminiscence into the space of exhibition while at the same time demonstrating the impossibility of mastery by the colonialist subject, who like the viewer of the work is never able to see the whole picture.

A fascination with subjects who move between identities, and with narratives susceptible to multiple interpretations, is evinced in *Study for the Mirror and the Garden, redux* (2008), which draws on the Spanish "converso" tradition where texts may mean one thing from a

Christian perspective, and another from a Jewish or Moorish one, as a way for converts to secretly maintain a previous identity. The commission came out of a visit to Granada, and one of the motifs in the video is a bacchanal supposedly attended by Lorca, Bunuel, and Dali, in which the irrational irrupts into everyday life. The video is projected onto two screens at right angles to each other, and reflected from mirrors, which also reflect the viewers, who thus become a part of the work. The two scenes are of a dinner in a baroque interior, and a picnic in a formal garden: characters from different genres and historical periods—the 15th-17th centuries, the 1920s, and the present—weave in and out, presenting fragments of narrative. *La Celestina*, the procuress and go-between from an early Spanish novel by de Rojas published in 1499, becomes—like the vampire of Barry's early work—an allegorical figure for the work's own liminal and trans-historical character, and for the process of its reception. The viewer's activity of the construction of meaning is prompted by what Roland Barthes called the "obtuse" dimension when the filmic emerges in the contingency of an image that overflows given signification, intimating both traces of the past and the openness of the future.

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