

Media and me

Judith Barry

The author wishes to clarify that the works illustrated here arise from her earlier research and have not been revised or updated, despite the evolution of her strategies in subsequent years.

Hovering over my relation to television¹ are two specters: Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes. Through their work, each reminds me in different ways – in particular Benjamin’s “The Artist as Producer”² and Barthes’ “The Death of the Author”³ – that when I think of television I must always ask, “What could television be if it wasn’t in the service of commercial interests?” And further, “How can media defined as ‘not television,’ as in ‘opposition to television,’ but still engaged with questions of media (this is crucial), produce other possibilities for action and for new cultural forms of engagement both within media, however that is defined, and within a broader cultural and social context?”⁴

To produce programming in most media (radio, television, film, new media, video games) connotes an audience, even if it is initially only the crew and actors, and this implies a public. This situation is markedly different from that of the lone studio artist working with no thought for the reception of the work; or so the myth goes. Even as the production process in both commercial new media, television and films and most experimental films, videos or new media is not democratic or utopian, it is collaborative by necessity (as well as hierarchical) and there is a strong impetus toward interactivity, if not collaboration, among the

crew, actors, producers and sponsors, which, at the very least, presupposes, if not implies, a dialogue. This is true even if there is never any engagement with the public. Following a similar logic, I would argue that media works are also by definition performative.⁵

As an artist I have a wide-ranging practice where both the form and the content of my work emerge from research on specific issues. However, as someone who is interested in questions of representation, “media” in various forms often figures in my work. Below is a brief discussion of some of the ways that, in my work, I have thought through the two questions raised above in relation to television.

Cinema would have remained a curiosity had it not attached itself to older forms of specular, theatrical entertainment, specifically melodrama. It is the development of cinematic language over time, through the shot structure, coupled with montage, to visually represent a story AND produce “believable, inhabitable space,” which the viewer can enter in what Christian Metz describes as a “wide awake dream state” – thereby accessing multiple points of view, while knowingly watching the film, in the dark, surrounded by strangers – that invested the invention of the “moving image” with its power as a medium.

Television was well established by the late seventies. It had appropriated the dominant forms of cinema by using many of its tropes while changing cinema’s narrative structure (beginning, middle, end) to a “flow.” TV is episodic. It attenuates across time in soap operas, serials, news, and variety programs. This episodic structure, coupled with my understanding of how it is that cinema, first, and later television, create an architecture of inhabitable psychic space, has directly influenced how I create

my work, no matter what form it takes – sculpture, photography, graphic design, film and video, installation and new media. My relationship to these issues is most discernible in my installations – whether they are using media, directly or not; whether they are exhibition designs, or not.

I construct what I call “subject positions,” a form of address that the viewer/user can discover within my installations, by applying montage techniques as a way to spatialize physically and make inhabitable the issues each project is addressing. In this way viewers can construct a variety of meanings about the work as they move through the space.⁶ I also use the notion of “subject positions” in single channel videos such as *Casual Shopper* (1981) where, when the flâneuse “looks” or moves, the architecture, in this case a mall, comes to life. This understanding of how the spaces that media can potentially produce within physical space was the beginning of my investigation of the two questions raised at the beginning of this article. Simultaneously, I am also interested in how media – television, film, sound, computer, new media, and video games – might also similarly be made spatial within public and private space. Often I configure these “subject positions” alongside an examination of how a particular media AND a particular set of ideas might be rendered inhabitable. All of this fuels the logic of the inquiries that I perform within my work.⁷

In the exhibition and installation projects such as *Coca-Cola: Building Conventions* (1980) and *Display: Museum of Signs* (1985), I “détourned” media (to borrow a term from the Situationists)⁸ as a “raw material” and transformed it into another form. Electronic signage above a red carpet directed revelers to consume not only the food of various cultures, but also those



Casual Shopper

Single channel video. RT-3 versions (3 min, 6 min, 28 min),
1980/81. Premiered Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley, California, 1981

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. This is a love story that never advances beyond that which can be imagined, which is never consummated, but which returns to a prosaic scene where demands are exchanged and desire circulates endlessly. Share the fantasy.

Judith Barry, "Casual Imagination," in Brian Wallis (ed.), *Blasted Allegories*.
Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987



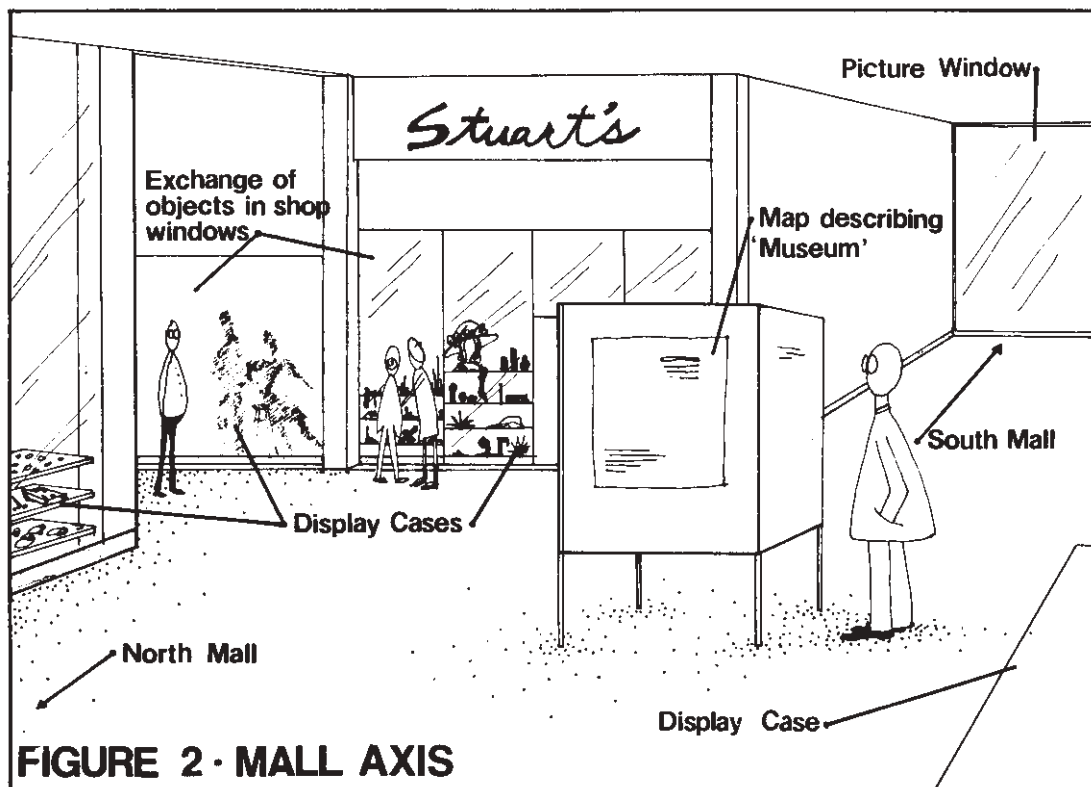
Coca-Cola: Building Conventions

Exhibition design. San Francisco Pier, 1980

For a party for Coca-Cola vendors I transformed the Pier to the street shown here. Rather than asking the revelers to eat their way through the ethnic history of San Francisco, I proposed that the food displays be based on historical research: that moment when Coca-Cola gained hegemony worldwide.

Judith Barry, "Building Conventions," *Real Life Magazine*, New York, Summer 1981.

moments when Coke gained worldwide hegemony. *Display: Museum of Signs*, uses old media – sixteenth-century mnemonic devices – to map a shopping mall as an endlessly unfolding mise-en-abyme where desire circulates endlessly as consumer objects are perpetually displaced. *For In the shadow of the city... vamp r y* (1985), the viewer produces the work's meaning by attempting to construct narrative closure from the filmic fragments that continuously dissolve on the double-sided screen. In different ways these works rely on the knowledge that viewers will unconsciously invoke the codes of narrative media when they engage with the work.



Display: Museum of Signs

Installation proposal. Shopping Mall, Palo Alto, California, 1980.

First exhibited in White Columns, New York, 1985

Mnemonic devices were used to transform a working-class shopping mall into a memory palace. The use of contemporary display techniques produces numerous desire(s) that the activity of shopping unleashes but which the object alone cannot fulfill. This leads to new forms of subjectivity such as a female flâneuse (after Walter Benjamin's nineteenth-century male flâneur). The drawings show initial preparatory sketches that chart how fetishization, mapping, the memory theater, and "deconstruction" might shape this reconfigured space.

Another strategy I use to address “what media can be” is to explore the interstitial differences among forms of representation – film, television, graphics, new media, photography – within “the space that art makes.”⁹ For example, *Blew* and other short videos use the notion of the shot as the smallest unit of meaning to see how brief a film or video can be and still produce meaning.¹⁰ In *They Agape* (1982), *Kaleidoscope* (1978) and *Space Invaders* (1982), I interrogate narrative tropes from soap operas and other television conventions in relation to the construction of gender, subjectivity, and the short-film/video form. *Space Invaders* explores the role of the ‘evil’ woman in soap opera, a character with whom many women can identify precisely because she transgresses and is not ‘punished’ by the narrative,¹¹ alongside new forms of spatiality/subjectivity produced by video games.¹² Both *They Agape* and *Kaleidoscope* use the structure of episodic television, each in different ways, to query notions about “love” and “relationships” in the wake of second-wave feminisms.

Along the border between San Diego and Tijuana, I invoked the notion of the Situationist “derive” in a series of stories, identity graphics and other artists’ projects from an international exhibition, InSite-05, which unfolded across four windows in downtown San Diego. Initially proposed as a pop-up installation, the project, *Border Stories, Working Title, From One Place to Another* (2000) functions as a “narrowcast” network. Its episodic flow overtly raises the question for a variety of publics of “what might media be?” Each day pedestrians encounter different sequences of the stories, provoking responses such as “what is this?” “a film?” “an ad?” “what are you selling?” “what is InSite?” and so on. Banal as this seems, a great deal of public dialogue

was created. Later, as the installation became “naturalized,” reactions to the work evolved into nuanced experiences with the individual stories and characters and led to discussions about the increasing blur between the two cities of Tijuana and San Diego.¹³



Border Stories, Working Title, From One Place to Another

4 channel video sound installation. Dimensions and configurations variable. Also, a single channel video, 2006. First exhibited at inSITE 2000, San Diego/Tijuana 2000

“There is nothing so _____ as that border in the mind.”

This project, an “ambient network” of short stories, identity graphics and artists’ projects about life along the border between San Diego and Tijuana, raises questions about what media might be other than television or advertising when it appears unbidden within a cityscape. Designed to function somewhat like the Situationists’ notion of a *détournement*, it was situated across several consecutive windows as an invisible border between the new sanitized tourist-friendly downtown and the old seedy port city of San Diego.

I have also thought about the space that television makes. Television's relation to the home is one of mimesis. It enters the home as "radio with pictures," furniture, an appliance; gradually it takes on other guises, becoming part of daily life: as viewers "we become what we behold." *For the exhibition From Receiver to Remote Control: the television set* (1990), Ken Saylor and I, as exhibition designers, charted the history of this transformation through more than twenty period rooms with appropriate TV programming, mapping the transformation of the US home from a site of production to a site of consumption and revealing how deeply television has affected every aspect of daily and cultural life.¹⁴ Viewing conventions evolved and TV has become a constant in every room. Television has the status of a legally protected necessity.¹⁵ Another project, *(Home)icide* (1993), also with Ken Saylor, deviated from the architectural trope, "The House of the Future," to look specifically at how we live today.

Our House of the Present asks the question, "Do our living environments adequately reflect the ways we live, particularly in terms of the discourses that shape the fabric of our daily lives?" We retro-fitted one of Le Corbusier's Unite apartments, "a machine for living," into a site that reflected the many ways contemporary discourses, including all kinds of media, circulate and transform daily life; revolutionizing our experience of "what is home?" One of the main elements of the installation is a "fly-thru" computer-animated model with various kinds of television, film et al. displayed within the home. As the viewer navigates the space, the form of the home "morphs" continuously in relation to the various types of information that now circulate and affect the concept of "home."¹⁶



From Receiver to Remote Control: the television set
Exhibition design. Collaboration with Ken Saylor. Curator: Mathew Geller.
The New Museum, New York, 1990

In a series of 20 period rooms with period TV programming, this exhibition traced how television transformed the home from a site of production into one of consumption: the fifties' notions of "home theater"; the "easy living" implied by labor saving appliances; the sixties as the only moment when television was overtly political from Civil Rights activism to the Vietnam War; the seventies and the proliferation of technologies with portable color TV and cable; the eighties and the potential for a return to production in the form of the home computer.



From Receiver to Remote... Channeling Spain 2010

Judith Barry / Ken Saylor / Project Projects, Installation with Spain/US timeline and TV programming, 91 photographs, 10 flat screens, sound, dimensions variable.
TV/ARTS/TV, Arts Santa Mònica, Barcelona (from October 15 until December 5, 2010)

The installation charts the development of politics in Spain and the US between the sixties and nineties in relation to the television histories of both countries and the advent of "narrowcasting" programming.

From the late seventies until the mid-nineties, I found the divide separating “high art” from “popular culture” to be another productive, interstitial site to examine. While there is a long history of a rich dialogue between art and popular culture – MTV, music videos, punk rock, no-wave/new-wave filmmaking, appropriation art and project specific work – now that division has all but vanished.¹⁷ Television has mutated into “narrowcast” networks. Meanwhile the Internet and social media sites are creating new ways for media to be much more interactive than television currently is. Popular culture, including all media, has become a raw material that artists can use to produce their work.¹⁸

So, to briefly return to the two questions raised at the beginning of this text, one way those issues are now being addressed is through social media and these new forms produce newer kinds of subjectivity than those constructed by television and cinema. As artists, how will we make use of these new forms of subjectivity? How will the older types of media be affected? While the dominance of US media/multinational conglomerates is still strong, media has and is evolving differently in other countries. As the world becomes more connected and, hopefully, more transparent, I am curious to see what we can learn from understanding our differences through media.¹⁹

1. Judith Barry, "Public Fantasy" in Iwona Blaszwick (ed.): *An Anthology of Critical Essays, Fictions and Project Descriptions by Judith Barry*. London: ICA, 1991.
2. Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*. London: New Left Books, 1973.
3. Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978.
4. As the legacy of these authors and articles is well known I will not retrace their arguments specifically here. But I do want to mention the seventies adage: "Television programming is just the filler between television commercials" as this attitude, a legacy of Frankfurt sociology as it was understood in the US, characterized the intense distrust of television and all popular culture within the art world. Hence, a discussion about the two questions posed above was all but impossible until the late seventies and early eighties when many artists begin to make use of dominant media forms. These artists include Jack Goldstein, Sherry Levine, John Sanborn and Kit Fitzgerald, Barbara Kruger, Sarah Charlesworth, Cindy Sherman, myself, and many, many others. See for example, *The Pictures Show*, Artists Space, New York, curated by Douglas Crimp in 1977 and restaged by the Douglas Eklund at the Metropolitan Museum, New York, 2009. See Lucinda C. Furlong, "Getting High Tech: The New Television," in *The Independent*, New York, March 1985, which presents the uneasy relation between art and television, ca. 1985.

Furthermore, the question about television and interactivity has always been a bit of a red herring as it has always been clear from its inception that most people were not interested in interactive television. You can easily see that if you trace the history of the failure of that "invention" from the forties with DIY television to the attempt in the early 2000s to merge television and the computer into one machine. It is the computer's "personal-ness" that has altered viewing conventions by providing connection in seemingly "real time" that has driven the desire for interactivity in "real time."

5. This drive toward both dialogue and performance might be seen as one among many reasons for the rise of Reality TV. Bravo's summer series, *Work of Art: The Next Great Artist*, with 14 artists surviving the challenges from a group of judges (none with an advanced art degree) might have been an opportunity to elevate the public discourse about art. However, the conceit of the series was to choose artists who can perform as naïfs within a decidedly pre-"post studio" milieu. Many have little formal art training. To date, the two best-known artists, those with name recognition/career success, have been eliminated. Or, consider James Franco, a semi-well-known actor, (*Pineapple Express*), currently attending several US MFA art programs and intervening as an actor/artist, within the structure of television soap opera, playing a character called James Franco who is an actor/artist attending several US MFA art programs intervening into a soap opera. Supposedly, he will have the first exhibition curated by the new director of MOCA, Jeffrey Deitch, in Los Angeles in autumn 2010.
6. Judith Barry, "The Space that Art Makes," in *A Dynamic Equilibrium: in pursuit of Public Terrain*, (Sally Yard, ed.). San Diego: Installation Gallery, 2007.
7. Judith Barry, "Casual Imagination," in *Discourse* no. 4, Berkeley, 1980-81. Reprinted in *Blasted Allegories*, MIT press, 1987, among other places.
8. Judith Barry/Ken Saylor, "Design Notations," *a/drift*, curated by Joshua Decter, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, 1996.
9. Judith Barry, "The Space that Art Makes," in *A Dynamic Equilibrium: in pursuit of Public Terrain*, (Sally Yard, ed.). San Diego: Installation Gallery, 2007.
10. Christian Metz's *The Imaginary Signifier*, (Eng. trans. 1982), Bloomington: Indiana University Press, and Bertrand Augst's work on filmic structure (sadly for the most part unpublished) and the short form of television – the commercial, were the genesis for these works that I began making in 1980 and first screened in alternative spaces in 80 Langton Street, San Francisco, 1982. Bertrand Augst is the professor at UC, Berkeley, who began bringing film theory/film studies to Berkeley as part of the Rhetoric Department. He translated much of Metz's work and invited many other scholars and filmmakers to UC, Berkeley, to teach, including Raymond Bellour, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and many others. I consider myself extremely fortunate to have been his student during the late seventies and into the early eighties.

11. Tania Modeleski, *Loving with a Vengeance*. Connecticut: Archon books, 1982.
12. Judith Barry, "Space Invaders," ICC, Antwerp, Belgium (catalogue essay) for a solo exhibition in Antwerp, Belgium, 1982. Reprinted in *Un/Necessary Image*, MIT Press, 1983. See also: Peter Lehman, "Video Art, Video Games, interview with J. Barry," *Wide Angle*, no. 6, March 1984.
13. Public conversations in San Diego during the exhibition, 2001. *InSite* an international exhibition that occurs along the border between San Diego, Ca., and Tijuana, Mexico. Further information about *InSite* can be found at <inSite_05>. For information about my project see *Fugitive Sites, New Contemporary Art Projects for San Diego / Tijuana*, Installation Gallery, San Diego, 2002.
14. The exhibition took place at The New Museum, New York, 1990, curated by Matthew Geller. The exhibition TV/ARTS/TV at Arts Santa Monica, Barcelona (October 15 – December 5, 2010) was an updated version of this project now called: *From Receiver to Remote... Channeling Spain*, 2010. For this installation, Ken Saylor, Project Projects and I compared the relationship between television and democracy in the US and Spain between the sixties and the nineties.
15. The right to own a television is protected under most US bankruptcy laws as is the right to own a car. Both are considered necessities and cannot be "given up" to the courts during bankruptcy proceedings.
16. Judith Barry/Ken Saylor, "House of the Present: (Home)icide," for the *Project Unité*, [exh. cat] curated by Yves Aupetitallot, Firminy, France, 1993.
17. I have written about this in many articles beginning with Judith Barry/Sandy Flitterman, "Textual Strategies: The Politics of Art Making," *Screen*, volume 21, no. 2, 1980, and in many articles in the book *Public Fantasy*, op. cit., and in "Space Invaders," op. cit.
18. See Judith Barry, "This is not a Paradox," in *Illuminating Video*, Aperture/BAVC, New York, 1989, a discussion of Peter Wollen's essay, "The Two Avant-gardes," *Studio International*, no. 190, November/December 1973, in relation to MTV and artist television as two kinds of networks; "Design Notations," op. cit., where it became clear to us that indeed the divide between popular culture and the art world had dissolved and that in many ways this exhibition marked the end of that divide; see also Judith Barry, "An Uneven Parallel Construction," in *Die Medien Der Kunst / Die Kunst Der Medien*, Benteli/ZKM, Bern/Karlsruhe, 2004, an article about my work and others that discusses the question of how media has transformed artists' relationships to producing their art works.
19. What I do find interesting about television are two things for which the art world doesn't seem to have much time: one is the long form of television and the other is the opportunities opened up, particularly for news, as television becomes much more about "narrowcasting" than about the national networks slowly dying in the US. Arguably one reason the art world can't be very interested in the long form is because of the viewing conventions/delivery system within the art world for media-derived work. For example, video wasn't accepted until institutions allowed artists to screen their single channel videos in film-like conditions – in a black box with seating with a large projected image and immersive sound.

The Wire is a good example of the long form of television. Its 60 hours, perhaps the first US produced social analysis of a failed city, was created by a former journalist, David Simon, who covered the city desk at the Baltimore Sun Newspaper. It is the delivery system of television as DVD – as hackable in its DVD form – that makes the success of this long form possible. Further, the form of "narrowcasting" itself presents many possibilities – for instance as print newspapers downsize and as television networks seek substantive content, mergers between the two are certainly plausible.

BIOGRAPHY

Judith Barry is a North American artist whose work revolves around performance, video, installation and photography. She is particularly interested in new technologies and feminist questions.

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