

Judith Barry

... *Cairo stories* catalogue text

*A plot for a Biennial*, Sharhah Biennial (long version)

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Interview: Judith Barry and Jean Fisher in conversation in Lisbon

JF: People are struck by how contemporary *First and Third* is, perhaps because the questions it raises about cultural identity and belonging have become even more relevant now than they were during the 1980s. How did *First and Third* evolve?

JB: *First and Third* is about immigrant experiences and especially people's hopes and dreams in the US around the so-called American Dream. I started collecting the stories in 1985 and it premiered in 1987 at the Whitney biennale in New York City. I've subsequently made several other projects that have to do with true stories that people tell one another. One of the interesting things about showing the work now is how little things seem to have changed since then with regards some of the issues this work raises. Do you have any comments on how 'postcolonial studies', for want of a better term, has changed over time, for example from the exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* (1989) up through the so-called 'globalisation' of the art world today?

JF: You are right to think that 'postcolonial' is an unsatisfactory term, as it suggests a temporal succession when it is really a discourse on relations of power, like feminism, but from the perspective of the legacies of colonialism: for instance, issues of national identity in multicultural societies and geopolitical centre-margin inequities. *Magiciens de la Terre* was an important exhibition because, despite itself, it brought to the surface issues that weren't being articulated in the mainstream art world. It prompted the Western art world's interest in art practices from other geographies, and set the trend towards global 'inclusiveness'. But in presenting practices by non-Western 'others' whose formal languages were tied to ritual, not 'art' as the West understands it, it raised certain problems: without a means of translation, there was the danger of exoticising these practices in a colonialist way or falling into postmodern relativism; more crucially, based in a concept of cultural purity, the exhibition disavowed a long history of modernist cross-cultural exchange. It should therefore be seen in the same frame as another exhibition in 1989, *The Other Story*, at the Hayward Gallery, curated by the Pakistani-born British artist Rasheed Araeen, and regarded as beginning the 'decolonisation' of the art world. This exhibition presented modernism from African, African Caribbean and Asian artists resident in the UK since the 1950s and hitherto excluded from the official history of British art. In complete contradiction to *Magiciens de la Terre's* attachment to purity and the prevailing attitude that modernism was the *property* of the West, it took the 'postcolonial' perspective that modernity was a *consequence* of the colonial encounter – it was a mutual, if not equal exchange. By the early 20th century we see the emergence of diverse modernisms in different geographies, each responding to the colonial encounter in their own way in their own time.

JB: I would argue that Art Nouveau/Jugendstil in architecture definitely came out of a specific colonial experience as well. My video panorama, *The Work of the Forest*, was exactly about those issues. In researching the relationship in Belgium, I discovered that African art was already well-known through illustrations; and certainly by 1897, when the Art Nouveau architects mounted the Colonial Exposition of Central Africa, commissioned by Leopold II to convince the Belgium populace to further colonize Africa, they already had on hand more than 2000 artefacts in what now is the Tervuren Museum. If you look closely at the forms of these artefacts, there is a one-to-one correspondence between them and the design motifs in Victor Horta's and Paul Hankar's Art Nouveau. Meanwhile, architecture history does not acknowledge any relationship; and art history says there was no relationship between art and Africa until Picasso goes to the Museum of Man in Paris in 1905. This is the history still taught about these two movements.

JF: That's a very interesting case study. It's only when one puts oneself into the other's situation and a dialogue begins that you start to see the ambiguities and paradoxes of global modernism. For example, the Tanzanian artist Evelyn Nicodemus says that what is not recognised is that the 'modern' for Africans when they encountered western aesthetic forms was, of course, naturalism – the painted figure; their own sculpture was 'traditional'. And, of course, it was the reverse for European artists: by the early 20th century figuration was tradition, whereas the appropriation of African forms was modern. So the reality is complex. As you say, we are encouraged to conform to a Western art historical canon that is a distortion of the truth; and until we get more dialogue amongst different nations and practices then a more complete history will not be possible. A lack of dialogue relates to the current tensions that have emerged around the local, the national and the so-called 'global'. This is oversimplifying, but what we call 'neo-liberal democracy' has been the privileging of individual rights at the expense of collective responsibility, which has led to alienation. But perhaps part of the contemporary feel of *First and Third* is that it appeals to this shared experience whilst offering the listener a space of dialogue?

JB: We are living in a time when there is tremendous media saturation, non-stop news coverage for example, and yet while now there are many opinions in the very partisan US news, there seems to be little analysis; few 'truths' revealed within all of this. You discover that you learn very little as you simultaneously feel both powerless and complicit instead of collectively responsible and empowered. In the stories of *First and Third* hopefully you recognize a little of yourself in them as you listen. Also, I think there is something in the process of listening as an activity that offers up a space for dialogue and for reflection. You don't know when you start listening exactly where you will go, but in the act of listening, you allow for the unknown.

One of the things about working on projects like *First and Third* is that as an artist you work within communities and you are able to disappear within the work. Yes the artist name still legitimates the work in some art world contexts, but it is not easily confused

with the work. Hence in these projects, I function more as a facilitator and much less as an 'auteur'.

I've realized oral history projects similar to *First and Third* in seven different cultures and each time the issues were very different. What stayed the same, however, are the issues around collectivity; often seemingly invisible networks of women (usually); there is an implied politics there and at the least, *affect*.

JF: Another incredibly important aspect raised by *First and Third*, especially in the context of the homogenising drive of capitalist globalisation, is personal testimony as opposed to hegemonic history which is anonymous and doesn't account for the lives of ordinary people – and I'm not just talking about immigrant peoples, but how everybody is dislocated from the past without any secure future. Narrativity is how we construct a sense of self and cultural memory. *First and Third* was, presciently, among the first works that dealt with this issue. Subsequently, say, during the 90s, various artists from the black and Asian diasporas in the U K used testimony, which was not about recovering some nostalgic, imaginary past, but asking, how does one reconstitute a sense of identity, belonging and collective memory within the shared realities of the present. In this sense testimony articulates what hegemonised history conceals.

JB: One of the interesting things about working on the "Cairo women stories" (working title) recently in Egypt was that a lot of my preconceptions about Cairene women were completely wrong. For instance, in the USA wealthy women have more control over their destinies than working class or poor women do. In Cairo, the opposite seems true as wealthy women are much more beholden to their families and hence have many fewer choices and little control over their lives; even today. What I discovered was that women who had *few* family ties and some education, had the more choice because they were able to jump class or reinvent themselves. One writer I found particularly useful for this project was the urban geographer, Arjun Appadurai, especially his exploration of the cultural efficacy of the 'imagination' as enabling desire. He calls this activity 'the work of the imagination'. He is one of the few writers around so-called 'globalization' (global for whom, exactly?) who values culture and imagination. In describing how story-telling constructs not only affect, but effect, he describes how the stories people tell themselves of *getting* from here to there actually aid them physically to get *there* as the process of telling these stories, again and again, makes it seem possible, then plausible. I've certainly witnessed this in these stories I've collected. There's also something else about the role of the *listener* in these projects that I want to mention which is that people like to tell their stories to strangers, yes to embellish them. of course, but also to imagine another possibility, a different outcome ; and they'll often tell or imagine things with strangers that they dare not imagine with anyone from their own cultures.

JF: The imagination may be all we have left! Perhaps this might summarise an answer to your question about if and how things have changed since you produced *First and Third* in the 1980s. Despite the fact that globalism in the art world has increased the circulation of non-western art, the systemic relations of power have not yet changed, because globalisation, in terms of communications technologies, concerns the management of the

world for the benefit of the control and circulation of capital, commodities and neoliberal ideology! As you said: 'global for whom?'