



Judith Barry, *...Cairo stories*, 2010-2011, multi-site video installation, dimensions variable.
Image courtesy of the artist and Galerie Karin Sachs, Munich.

...CAIRO STORIES BY JUDITH BARRY

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Judith Barry is an American artist who works with media to address and (re) present society – its individuals, its conditions, and its structures. She has critiqued immigration and race relations in *First and Third* (1987), untangled capitalist and cultural hegemony in video pieces such as *Casual Shopper* (1981), and tackled the discourses occupied by translation studies with her latest work, *...Cairo stories* (2011). After graduating with a degree in architecture, and subsequently art and technology, Barry developed her identity as an artist and writer in New York at a time when postmodernist discourses had started to emerge. She shared studio assistants with the patron saint of video art, Nam June Paik, and developed her practice alongside contemporaries such as Cindy Sherman, Jenny Holzer, Hans Haacke, and Krzysztof Wodiczko. Perhaps lesser known in the Middle East than some of her compatriots, Barry's work has recently resurfaced into public consciousness because of *...Cairo stories*, which premiered at the 2011 Sharjah Biennale.

The project revolves around audio-visual presentations of personal stories told by a multitude of Cairene women, then recorded, edited, and performed by actors. It is an extension of a series by Judith Barry, entitled *...Not reconciled*, whose first component, *First and Third*, was presented at the 1987 Whitney Biennale and considered a subversion of the Whitney's agenda to present and collect so-called "American" art. *First and Third* used "as told to" stories to explore notions of the American Dream among recent immigrants to the United States, at a time when few minority-ethnic voices were present in the Whitney Museum of American Art. In 1991, London commuters waiting at Hammersmith Underground Station were presented with the second chapter of *...Not reconciled*. Here, large-scale disembodied heads recounted "as told to" tales of dispossession and segregation from the windows of a kiosk on the station platform. The interconnected themes that bind these works –

the narration and representation of hidden and untold histories – are deftly woven into the fabric of Barry's latest piece.

...Cairo stories, which also forms part of *...Not reconciled*, began informally in 2001 and concluded in the Spring of 2011. In its initial installation at Sharjah, *...Cairo stories* was presented as overlapping talking heads on large-scale projections in the public realm. The context in which Barry positions her work, she asserts, relates to a desire to produce or construct meaning. She is concerned with the relationship that the viewer is able to build by interacting with the piece. This theme can be observed throughout the artist's career, such as in her 1985 installation, *In the Shadow of the City Vampire*. Here, Barry uses a two-sided screen to create a fragmented visualization of both suburban and metropolitan space. Juxtaposing a disjointed soundscape with overlaid looped films and a slide projection of her subjects, Barry proposes that each subject is positioned simultaneously as an active agent and an object for the all-consuming spectator.

This meticulous detail is evident in each of the artist's installations. Barry is accustomed to reconfiguring her installations for each site. In the European premiere of *...Cairo stories* at Galerie Karin Sachs in Munich, the characters' personal narratives were positioned on vertically integrated HD TV screens, operating on a loop. Each account, recited by an actor and produced in a mixture of predominantly Cairene Arabic and English, was positioned alongside an identically sized photographic portrait of the female performer. The juxtaposition of the static and the moving images raised pertinent questions about the politics of contemporary image making. As each individual narrative was performed, it ended, gradually fading into a dark and cavernous "non place." This fostered a discombobulating sense of temporality for the audience. Each story began with a 30-second scene of darkness, and then slowly materialized into

an image, a face, before each chronicle was recited. Blurring and dissolving, initially each video image was static – in simultaneity with the photograph alongside it. The viewer came to assume that both pictorial representations were fixed in space and time, until one of the women began to speak to the viewer.

Barry's choice to use actors in her works is not merely pragmatic. Rather, it manifests the politics of contemporary image making. When does an "image" represent an "ultimate truth?" Should a "truthful" image be glossy and "performed," or must it strictly operate within the tropes of documentary practice? In ...*Cairo stories*, Barry has captured over 200 stories, editing and scripting them with a team of translators and professional Arabic-speaking actors. The process found the artist melding together both fictive and documentary techniques, espousing a form of commentary on the mediated nature of contemporary Middle Eastern representation. By the same token, Barry does not let this desire to remain "truthful" strip the project of its more theatrical qualities. Indeed, she understands that the extra-ordinariness of daily life is best animated through an act of dramatic construction, as is evidenced by the editing of each character's paced and synchronized monologues. This tendency isn't entirely unfamiliar. The renowned Polish-Canadian artist Krzysztof Wodiczko has fashioned a creative practice by turning socially conscious verbatim accounts into epically produced audiovisual experiences.

Yet the most astounding quality of ...*Cairo stories* is how the artist is able to synthesize such a broad spectrum of accounts into a narrative experience that is coherent, intimate, and polyglot. In

one of the most poignant instances, a translator named Mona, born in Paris and living in the Cairene metropolis, weeps before our eyes as she recollects her alienation from both her husband and her children. Near the end of her monologue, she starts to break down, "My daughter, she says that I made her my confidant at a too early age, that she doesn't have a mother, even though I am her best friend." Her tears start gradually effervescing into color, before they dissipate unhurriedly into the darkness of Barry's palette. And in these moments, her all-encompassing isolation becomes apparent, "I guess I'm not a very good translator for my son either," she tells us. "He lives with me at home, but he is just like his father. He doesn't speak to me."

In the final tale of ...*Cairo stories*, a young pregnant lady, Nadine, tells us about the uprising in Cairo's Tahrir Square at the very beginning of the Egyptian Revolution of 2011. She is ebullient, imagining a future for her unborn child that will be liberated from the hands of tyranny. She tells us, "When I walk around the square, I hear bits of conversations, and I hear one man, named Abdel, I hear him say: my vision goes much further than what my eyes can see." Her story ends prophetically when Nadine remarks, "It is funny because nobody wants to give up even a single moment that can be imbued by the idea of defiance. And yes, we may be weary, but when the morning comes, we will breathe freedom."

Barry notes that these tales surfaced to her consciousness in 2001 while representing the US at the Cairo Biennale. During her visit, the artist found that many women would reveal personal stories to her – perhaps, she states,

"because I was a 'foreigner' and they could speak more freely with me than with someone from their own culture." When she was later asked by Scott Bailey at the American University in Cairo Gallery to realize a project, Barry returned to those early accounts and began to build an archive that spanned the various strata of Cairene life. The breadth of this archive untangles various forms of typecasting, revealing Egyptian working class women as empowered breadwinners. On the opposite end of the spectrum, we find the upper-class elite, isolated between a local and diasporic identity. Barry's project was thwarted at times, in one instance by the launch of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, which found the artist escorted from Cairo by US forces. Subsequently, her filming process had to be shifted to New York by the initial dissidence which led to the Egyptian revolution of 2011.

When visual art rubs so close to current affairs, an inherent possibility arises of (mis)appropriation. A skeptic could ask: Through whose lenses are we witnessing this world? Yet ...*Cairo stories* transcends Barry's own artistry. In a sense, Barry's boldest movement was to create the construct by which these narratives could be collated and performed, leaving them to exist in the world so that they may play with each visitor's sense of hermeneutics. ...*Cairo stories* explores history's subjectivity – its construction, its performance, and how its various facets can be tethered to a specific time and place. Each autonomous narration is a composite of a larger puzzle: through the plurality of representation, these narratives give voice not only to Cairene women but to individuals the world over who have grappled or struggled with

their own identity.

...*Cairo stories* is more than a piece of verbatim or documentary theatre, although arguably the act of narration is a shared trope. Rather, it is a researched experiment that maps out the ideological and political hierarchies which encompass the lives of Middle Eastern women, both directly and indirectly. It is a pursuit to construct a narrative out of fragments, a fluid and shape-shifting story uttered both in front of and behind closed doors. Told in the vernacular of the street – the voices of the shop vendors, teashop owners, and pedestrians, who collectively construct the social fabric of Cairo – ...*Cairo stories* examines how the personal stories we share with one another help us define subjective and objective histories. "For the stories that we tell each other," Barry professes, "reflect more accurately on us than on the facts of our lives."