

Judith Barry interviewed by Omar Kholeif



Judith Barry
...Cairo stories 2011

above
Dar Al-Nadwa, Sharjah
right
Galerie Karin Sachs, Munich

Omar Kholeif: Your latest body of work, ...Cairo stories, 2011, which was presented in two different forms first in Sharjah and later in Munich, took you almost a decade to complete. How did it evolve and why did it take so long to produce?

Judith Barry: I represented the US in the Cairo Biennale in 2001 and I fell in love with the city. In March 2003 Scott Bailey, then director of the American University in Cairo Gallery, invited me to make a project and that is when I began what became ...Cairo stories.

Coincidentally, this is also when the US began the second Iraq War. I was interviewing women on the streets around the AUC, then located in downtown near Tahrir Square, and, when rioting broke out, my project was deemed seditious and I was 'escorted' out of Egypt. Subsequently I made many trips to Cairo, progressively expanding my contacts, to reach the 214 women whose stories inform the current iteration of ...Cairo stories. As I wanted it to be an in-depth examination of women's lives across the many strata of Cairene culture, I never conceived of ...Cairo stories as something to be finished quickly. What was much more important was that it should reverberate with the women whose lives it was about. In many ways ...Cairo stories found me. When I was first in Cairo, many women I met casually revealed very personal things to me about their lives, possibly because I was a 'foreigner' and they could speak more freely with me than with someone from their own culture. This piqued my interest in the lives of women in Cairo and I became interested in the specificity of how women negotiate the daily existence of their lives.

In Sharjah the work was presented in the public realm as large-scale outdoor projections, while in Munich the work was far more intimate for the spectator because it was presented as six individual installation experiences in the gallery space. What was the reason for positioning the work in these two different ways and which is the ideal scenario?

I see the exhibition spaces that constitute the art world as open-ended and allowing a certain kind of freedom, in terms of the questions of representation, especially compared to the commercial

Cairo Stories



...Cairo stories 2011

top to bottom
interior views at Galerie Karin Sachs, Munich
Souk Al Arsa, Sharjah

realm. Hence, I cannot say that there are only two ways to present ...Cairo stories or any of my works. I often redesign my installations and the content in relation to the exhibition context. For ...Cairo stories in particular, both the form and the content – to go back to an early proto-semiotic formulation – produce meaning. Stories in particular lend themselves to many types of formulations and iterations. I can imagine it in many forms – including in written form or aurally. I am sure there are ways of presenting it that I have not yet thought of.

There are, however, several conditions that I like to insist upon when presenting this project. I seek to locate the work somehow within Middle Eastern and North African communities. In Munich we projected out of the windows of Import Export, an alternative space in the Arab part of the city. To make a context for the work, we also screened the film *Microphone*, 2010, which attracted a mixed audience of Turkish, Arabic and German speakers during the time that we were projecting there. While the stories were initially shot using actors speaking both Egyptian Arabic and English, a voice-over in German was included because reading subtitles takes away from the emotional impact of the stories.

I also insist that the stories appear and then disappear when they are projected or shown on a plasma screen. That the stories appear and disappear is central to the overall concept of the series of works of which ...Cairo stories is a part. I wanted to find a way to underscore what is unexpected in the way a story might be told, as well as to give a presence to that which might be unknown or unrepresented. In a sense a kind of ‘magic’ occurs when the stories are projected – suddenly on a blank wall a face materialises and then, during the storytelling process, the face becomes the person whose story it is. This also distinguishes the stories from television and news. Hence, there is a 30-second pause between stories where the wall is blank, and then a 30-second dissolve. This provides a separation between the stories so that they don’t blur together for the viewer.

The first iteration of the project, *first and third*, produced for the 1987 Whitney Biennial, was shown when few women or minorities were presented in that museum. I located the project – which was about hopes for an American Dream among recent immigrants – in disused spaces in the museum and disguised the video projector so that it disappeared into the space, hence to the viewer it appeared as though the walls themselves were speaking.

There is an obvious desire to unpack the mechanisms of representation in this work, not only of Arab women but, more specifically, Cairene women. What interested you in this?

There are a lot of stereotypes circulating about women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, yet the cultures of the various countries that make up the region are different. Cairo, being a place that many people visit because of the pyramids, is also one of the loci of ‘Orientalism’. As Edward Said discussed, the construction of the terms ‘Oriental’, ‘Arab’ or ‘Middle Eastern’ to describe people in this region is the attempt in occidental discourse to impose the hegemony of the West over many disparate cultures with the specific aim of devaluing them for subjugation – hence, not western is not rational, not trustworthy and not capable of self-government – and the specificity of any and all differences is erased. One antidote to this erasure of

difference, as Said argued, was to employ narrative rather than visual strategies as a means of both empowering local voices in particular places and of representing the complexities of specific experiences throughout a region – in this case Cairo. I use the documentary tradition and artistic licence to reconsider a conundrum posed by Ludwig Wittgenstein – that ordinary language is unable to convey the extraordinariness of existence.

The stories we tell each other – and ourselves – bear witness to how what is subjective and what is objective in our own histories also intersects with larger historical narratives and how all are partial and, simultaneously, each offers a multiplicity of representations. Do the stories we tell each other more accurately reflect who we are than the facts of our lives? I think so.

What was so culturally specific or unique about women from Cairo?

Many things! Initially, I interviewed women from privileged classes, and I was shocked to realise how little freedom these women have to determine the trajectory of their lives. Yes, they have money, but they have much less freedom than women in the middle and working classes. Their parents determine who they marry, what they study, where they live and so on. Their rueful understanding of their actual situation was often a by-product of our interviews. Although across MENA parents do suggest marriage partners, Cairo is less sophisticated than cosmopolitan Beirut, or so they told me. As I met more women from the middle and working class I began to see how less parental and societal pressure among these classes allows women more freedom to reinvent themselves. Also, the paucity of jobs in Egypt often means that working-class women are the breadwinners in their families as there is less of a stigma attached to a woman doing 'menial' work than would be attached to a man doing such work. The money this generates gives women agency both within their families and in society. Family is what matters most. Women as the primary earners can assert their power.

Meanwhile, the culture itself was becoming seemingly more conservative and, simultaneously, more liberal. In 2001, it was extremely unusual to see a woman in a niqab and very few women wore a headscarf. Gradually more and more women became 'covered'. Yet, no matter what the class and background, when asked, each had unique reasons for adopting it. Sometimes women would wear a headscarf in one part of the city but not another – for instance, downtown. In a sense it functions like a uniform to ward off harassment.

That Cairo has become more liberal is reflected in the agency of the educated classes, men and women – university is free – and also in the increased agency of many of the working-class women.

As I heard many times during the revolution: poverty does not produce revolution, agency does, and this includes the hopes and dreams that reverberated through Tahrir as we were filming ...*Cairo stories*. Revolution is born from those aspirations.

Your project was initiated after a trip to Cairo at the beginning of the new millennium. Did you ever feel conscious of the imperial connotations of your 'American-ness' while producing this work, especially considering the fact that you were working on the project during the start of the second Iraq War?

I felt my 'American-ness' most during the Cairo Biennale as these events are so nationalistic.

One reason I fell in love with Cairo was because of the bantering – the jokes and storytelling I heard while wandering the streets. Cairo

is polyglot, particularly downtown. Teashops and vendors blend with the sidewalk, and pedestrian traffic threads through labyrinthine passageways. Everyone talks to you, everyone has something to tell you, and after a while you realise that this storytelling, this form of engagement, is central to the social fabric and identity of the city. It is how you negotiate the city and also how you find your place within it – although for young women, this can often be rather difficult as they are the most distressed by the harassment.

After war broke out, I noticed the mood of the city towards me, a western person, change radically. Suddenly, taxi drivers no longer bantered with me, even the 'harassment' was noticeably subdued. The mood was wary, solemn, and I felt I was being watched more but no longer engaged with. This did not extend to the women I was interviewing as I had close relationships with my translators and this eased any tensions that these women felt, I think. Nonetheless, I always felt safe walking late at night – something I don't always feel in parts of New York City, where I live.

The use of actors in the different presentations creates a theatricality that emboldens the work. For me, at times it could feel like an uncomfortably mediated experience. What was your intention in this?

There are many reasons – especially for ...*Cairo stories* – that I use actors for these 'as-told-to' stories. Most women would not agree to have their photograph taken, much less allow a video of themselves to be shown. The non-linearity of the interview process means the stories don't often come out in a linear form, there were many digressions, as well as many people in attendance: translators – a crucial element in this process – family members, friends, neighbours, children. So that is the practical answer to your question.

More importantly, I have long been engaged with questions of 'what does it mean to image someone', to take their photograph or video them? How can you give the subject of the photo or video control over their image? How are you, as an artist, responsible for the use to which their image is put? These are all questions that were circulating within the art world in the 1980s and became part of the discourse of Postmodernism. My strategy for this series as a whole, and especially for Cairo, has been to pay people fairly throughout the process and to protect their privacy. All the interviewees and translators were paid, as was everyone else, including my team of Egyptian women advisers with whom I vetted all the stories.

Additionally, these women were telling me their stories because they wanted their stories to be heard. Having actors embody their stories enhanced the emotion of the stories and, after viewing the acting in other iterations of the series, they all agreed actors were the best solution to the issues raised above.

How did the community that you were working with evolve and change over the period of your research?

It grew and grew. I began with the undergrad students in the art and theatre department at the AUC. Throughout this process William Wells at the Townhouse Gallery was a crucial adviser. Gradually I extended the interviews across a network that included many other classes and across many parts of the city – from Cairo to the areas surrounding the city where the undocumented workers live and finally to parts of New Cairo.

I have kept in touch with many of the women – especially the translators and advisers whose work was obviously crucial to the success of the project, as well as the interviewees. I mean it when I say that ...*Cairo stories* is a collaboration.

I take some issue with writers, organisations, artists, curators etc who piggyback this notion of the Arab Spring, professing some grandiose prophecy that they were able to surmise through their practice. But still, I can't help but ask, did the recent dissidence encourage you to read or interpret some of the stories any differently in retrospect?

No. I was ready to shoot the project when the revolution began in Tahrir Square, hence I had already written and vetted the stories with my team. When it became clear that it would be very difficult to shoot in Cairo – this was mid January 2011 before the revolution began – I moved the shoot to NYC where there is a large cohort of Egyptian-Arabic actors. We began shooting in late January and I was able to include two stories from women at Tahrir Square.

These were relayed to me by my team of advisers and I included them almost verbatim, quickly casting actors and rehearsing them with the Egyptian dramaturges we had flown in for the shoot. During breaks in shooting we were glued to Al Jazeera on the computer – at the time not on TV channels in New York. You can imagine the mood on the set: elation mixed with excitement, and also at times a great deal of fear. We wrapped two days after President Mubarak stepped down.

Representation of the Arab world has been perpetually mediated by mainstream news media, at times defacing it, distancing it, rendering it devoid of intimacy. You, on the other hand, dig deep into the heart of the human. This makes me curious as to what your relationships with your female subjects were like. Did you feel an obligation to narrate their story, or was narration not at the fore of your consciousness when producing the work?

Yes, I felt a responsibility to be true to their stories since the truth of their stories – and the communication of those truths, however they are defined – is one of the most important issues that this project addresses. Many of my preconceptions about women's lives in Cairo were incorrect – often the opposite of what I expected from my US perspective. During the interview process, and especially as the interviews were always translated during the actual interview, we often questioned if our translations and understandings were correct. We often discussed with the woman whose story it was what she thought her story meant, her reasons for telling this story and who she wanted to reach with her story. The whys of this telling. Often we made more than one interview. We also discussed the intent of each story in the vetting process.

Is it a work of fiction? How did you marry together the fictive and documentary?

Isn't every story a fiction? Yet aren't they also true on some level? Every story implies a listener. I thought of the urban geographer Arjun Appadurai and 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 'globalisation' who values culture and imagination. In describing how storytelling 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 – the process of telling these stories, again and again, makes it seem possible, then plausible. I have certainly witnessed this in these stories.

There is 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 will often tell or imagine things with strangers that they dare not imagine with anyone from their own culture. All this was on my mind as we decided on the final form of the stories.

This process reminded me of Jacques Derrida's notion of hermeneutics as a living tradition moving along a horizon that is ever-evolving and continuously rearticulating the very processes of human thought. To aid the actors in embodying the stories, I encouraged them to make the stories their own any way they could, which included changing the language if they thought it was wrong for their character. I gave them access to the translations and recordings. Throughout the casting, rehearsals and shoot, there were two dramaturges from Egypt working with the actors.

The representations in ...Cairo stories transcend your individual artistry – and I mean this as a compliment – because the work diverges from everything that I have seen before, inasmuch as it avoids the tendency to overtly fetishise its subject. Was this intentional? Were you attempting to avoid the paradigm of Orientalism?

I was aiming for something contemporary in the visual style that was also capable of representing the specificity of Cairo. We had a number of discussions about the headscarf and how to frame women wearing it. We decided on a portrait mode with no cropping of the scarf or the women's faces.

In Galerie Karin Sachs, I also wanted to stage two different kinds of representation – the photographic portrait and the video portrait – as the juxtaposition of the two together enunciates some of the differences between these two modes of address. Each delivers crucial information to the viewer and yet each is very different.

It was important that the portrait would occasionally be of one of the women telling her story, but not always. I wasn't trying to produce a one-to-one comparison, but more to ask that the viewer recognise and hopefully think about the differences between these two forms. I noticed that once a viewer saw these two modes of representation align – meaning the woman in the portrait was also the woman in the video – then an aperçu effect would occur where suddenly the portrait *not* being the woman in the video made you think differently about both the portrait and the videos that you had already previously viewed.

Do you feel that the work is politicised – not merely because of the context that surrounds it but bearing in mind how it will also be 'appropriated' or 'interpreted'?

For me every act is ideological and this includes the political, both directly and indirectly. In my view there is nothing that is not potentially political. Whether it will be politicised overtly is another issue and often a question of who the audience is. ■

Judith Barry is an artist and a writer. ...*Cairo stories* will be exhibited at ZKM, Karlsruhe as part of 'The Global Contemporary. Art Worlds After 1989' until 5 February; 'Under the Big Black Sun: California Art 1974-81', MOCA, Los Angeles until 13 February; 'This Will Have Been: Art, Love & Politics in the 1980s', MCA, Chicago, 11 February to 3 June.

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