

Judith Barry and the Space of Fantasy

by Brian Wallis

For the 1991 Carnegie International, Judith Barry made a work that was disarmingly simple, even flimsy, yet elegantly summarized many of the complex issues in her work. Titled *Ars Memoriae Carnegieensis: A Memory Theater*, this piece consisted of a packet of eight large cards printed with information about the Carnegie Institute, a combination library, natural history museum, and museum of fine art.¹ With the cards as a guide, the viewer could navigate through the vast collections of the Carnegie, rethinking the meaning of its objects and the reasons for their assembly, and turning the museum into a rich storage house of memories that could be retrieved by the viewer by following the simple directions of the cards. In this way the viewer became, as Barry's cards noted, "the producer of the museum, bringing to bear her or his particular belief in the notion that the objects displayed constitute a coherent view of the UNIVERSE."² Although the idea derived from Barry's earlier work on the neo-platonic memory theaters of Renaissance architect Giulio Camillo and other mnemonic devices, in this site it gained particular meaning for the way it triangulated her interests in the psychological effects of public architecture, the relationship between representation and

Image from EDN, 1980

¹ Judith Barry, *Ars Memoriae Carnegieensis: A Memory Theater* (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Museum of Art, 1991).

² *Ibid*, n.p.

memory, and the redefinition of the viewer, or subject.³ In her explorations of how the viewer produces and extends the visual world that surrounds her or him, Barry offers an important contribution to feminist theories of subjectivity and to our understanding of the construction of gender in the public sphere.

Central to recent debates about feminism and post-modernism has been the whole — newly controversial —



Judith Barry,
The Work of the
Forest, 1992

topic of the “death of the subject.” This idea, first broached in different ways by the French poststructuralists Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault in the 1970s, was later taken up as a doxa by North American postmodernists.⁴ It held that the modernist notion of individual subjectivity — one’s unique self — was, in fact, a historically specific and socially constructed

³ On memory theaters, see Francis A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1966), pp. 129-59; and Judith Barry, *Public Fantasy* (London: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1990), pp. 21-22.

⁴ On Barthes’s and Foucault’s critiques of subjectivity, see Andreas Huyssen, “Mapping the Postmodern,” in Linda J. Nicholson, ed., *Feminism/Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 259-63.

fiction or myth, an accumulation of ideas and images assembled from various pre-existing discourses. The subject whose death was being announced was the individual as a universal, autonomous, self-generating being — a figure that formed the centerpiece of modernist culture. Replacing it was a postmodern subject, a sort of switching station for receiving, redacting, and recoding various channels of cultural information. Theorists from Fredric Jameson to Jean Baudrillard were quick to describe this new, postmodern subject not only as the product (rather than the source) of a variety of signifying practices but also as being shaped by those cultural formations. In other words, the conception of the logical, fully integrated self was superseded by a postmodern individual that they described as fragmented, schizophrenic and superficial, trapped in a maze of competing signs. Jameson, Baudrillard and other postmodernists disputed the possibility of objective, universally verifiable knowledge even as they denigrated individual expression. For them, the postmodern subject was, in a sense, placeless.⁵



Judith Barry,
au bout des
levres, 1996

But, as feminist critic Susan Bordo has pointed out, this geographical metaphor suggests a too-easy move from a modernist “view from nowhere” (objectivism) to an equally problematic postmodernist “view from everywhere” (relativism).⁶ And, in the process, there is considerable room for glossing over specific issues of social identity and location. In general, feminist critics have preferred to use the metaphor of the body and the

⁵ For a succinct summary of these debates, see David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1989).

⁶ Susan Bordo, “Feminism, Postmodernism, and Gender Skepticism,” in Nicholson, ed., *Feminism/Postmodernism*, pp. 133-56.

issues around what has been called “the politics of location.” Central to this redefinition of the body over the past decade are theories regarding the construction of identity. How are such various aspects of an individual’s character as personality, intelligence, sexual preference, and national allegiance formulated and maintained? Are such characteristics innate or genetically determined? Are they solely the product of social and political factors? Can they be changed? And in what ways? Perhaps the central topic in this debate concerns the ways in which gender roles are culturally constituted.

Since cultural signs play such a key role in defining the specifics of how gender roles are encoded — through what images, in what places — it is perhaps not surprising that visual artists have been instrumental in developing theories of gender and its construction. The works of Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, Adrian Piper — just to name three prominent examples — have all served to question cultural assumptions about gender and to assert more complex images of women. Barry’s work is perhaps less familiar in this context though she has dealt with many of the same issues and participated in many of the same exhibitions, including the landmark *Difference* exhibition at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in 1984. But Barry’s work is less conventional, constantly shifting styles and formats, while consistently probing a series of tough theoretical issues. Her museum installations and large-scale video projects are generally site specific and bear a direct relation to the physical nature and history of the place in which they are shown. Although Barry’s work has formal links to conceptual art and feminist performance art, it is equally inflected by critical theory and cinema studies. She studied film at Berkeley with Raymond Bellour in the late 1970s, was an editor of the journal *Discourse*, and has written extensively on cultural theory and representation.



Judith Barry, *Casual Shopper*, 1980-81

Although she draws on her own academic background in architecture and film theory for her installations, Barry’s work is anything but scholarly. Instead, she embraces the lush and seductive effects of film, video, computers, and architectural display. The fact that Barry was for years intensely involved in film studies may explain, however, why she tends to see subjectivity as an extension of architectural theory. For she is interested in the relational field that is established between a person’s perceptions, their physical body, and their surroundings. This is not a simple social construction model wherein the individual is shaped by the cultural cues they receive. The observer in Barry’s installations cannot remain passive, as with most art; the viewer must participate, and literally find his or her way through the work. This provides a metaphor for Barry’s view of the subject as active, interactive, productive, and worldly. This is no monad or cultural dupe. Instead of following a map in an orderly, rational fashion, this stroller must merge with the public space and be drawn toward engagement with various sites, as in the Situationist *derive*.

In her work, Barry tries to represent various forms of space, both past and future, and to guide the viewer into a confrontation with them. As she has said, “I am trying to get at new kinds of spatialization that might do more than merely represent existing space.”⁷ Architecture represents the translation of lived social conventions into spatial reality. Yet what interests Barry most are those unbuilt or imaginary forms of architecture, such as the cinematic backdrops of Alain Resnais’s *Last Year at Marienbad* or Ridley Scott’s *Bladerunner*. Such architectural fantasies propose spaces and constructions that have not been realized but could be. In this sense, they are wholly believable and inhabitable. These are, as Barry has said, images of the city that are “constructed

⁷ Barry, unpublished manuscript.

by the inhabitant as they are experienced.”⁸

Barry is fascinated by the ways in which the fully believable fictional space created in film has extended beyond the screen to create similarly invented or fictional “scenes” in the shopping mall, the suburban tract, the urban plaza. In her works, she seeks to challenge the superficial meaning of these sites by presenting their buried histories, using metaphor to expose the disjunction between their form and content, to emphasize the ideological implications of space, and to draw attention to the shaping effects of human subjectivity. Her principal metaphor is projection, both the physical projection of video and film and the

⁸ Barry, *Public Fantasy*, p. 44.



Alison and Peter Smithson, “House of the Future,” 1956

psychological projection of images and fantasies onto a surface. Her purpose is to transform space critically, to place the viewer in the midst of a newly encoded environment; not to change the environment, but to change the viewer.

Barry sees the subject from a Foucauldian perspective, not as a fixed entity but as the product of an intense channeling of individual psychosexual drives (desires and fantasies) through the shaping forms of various cultural systems (such as labor, consumption, visual representations, architecture).⁹ And, like Foucault, Barry believes that this production of the subject takes place in a space that is simultaneously psychic and tangible. Hence a key question for Barry is: How does the way we inhabit space affect our subjectivity? One purpose of works such as the two pieces shown in Vancouver, *Model for Stage and Screen* (1987) and *Imagination, Dead Imagine* (1991), then, is to consider the meaning of the body in space by studying specific functional effects of architecture. These works extend Barry’s investigation of the nature of postmodern subjectivity in the following ways: first, they challenge the ambiguous line between private and public space; second, they create “neutral” architectural forms that have no apparent history (but which reference whole genres of science-fiction imagery); and third, they



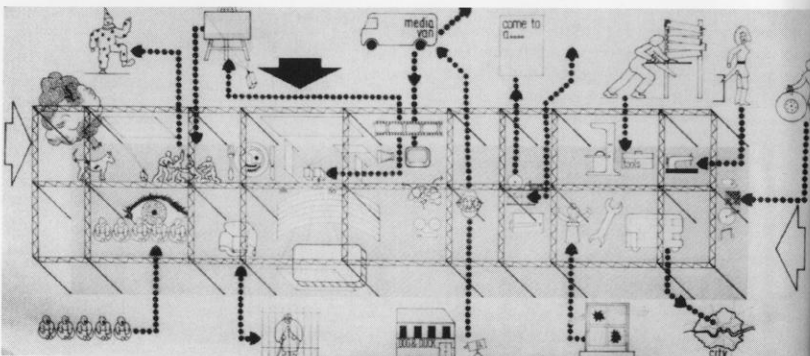
Judith Barry, *Model for Stage and Screen*, 1987

⁹ Typical of Barry’s Foucauldian take on the history of disciplinary systems is her view of the role of perspective: “Perspective gave form to and was a recognition of the place that subjectivity was to inhabit, a self-reflexive space that located the subject both for her/himself and for other subjects.”

elicit subjective, nonrational, and involuntary responses from the bodies of viewers. In other words, these works establish a kind of control, a sort of ground zero for subjective response. Though these works are less literally about historical memory, they articulate the physiological and psychological aspects of the viewer's response to visual cues.

In *Model for Stage and Screen* and *Imagination, Dead Imagine*, Barry shows that fantasy is no longer limited to the private psyche but projected on the screen of the social. These works demonstrate quite clearly how subjectivity is tied to the history of perception and projection. Not surprisingly, these two works also demonstrate what art historian Jonathan Crary has called the "carnal density of vision," that is, the corporeal aspect of seeing and participating in the world.¹⁰ Part of Barry's point is that visual responses are not only psychological but also manifestly physiological. In other words, the viewer is the producer of the images and information rather than simply its receiver. In *Model for Stage and Screen*, Barry makes this point in the form of a large science experiment. The viewer first climbs a series of small steps to enter a large circular chamber

¹⁰ Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990) p. 4.



The Fun Palace project, Cedric Price, 1962–67

containing a glowing pillar of light. Upon exiting this rotunda, an intense, vivid, and changing series of circular afterimages is experienced. The fact that the viewer involuntarily generates these "pictures" verifies Goethe's theories about the arbitrary and involuntary production of color and images in human nerve cells.¹¹

At first, *Imagination, Dead Imagine* appears to be a more conventional artwork, in part because it does not so actively involve the viewer in passing through and creating the image. In fact, the piece is designed to look like an oversized Minimalist sculpture. But projected from within this ten-foot-square cube is a giant head

continually doused with dirt, bugs, and various disgusting fluids. The viewer's relation to this work is inevitably one of awe and even queasiness, sensations that Barry relates to the eighteenth-century notion of the sublime, an aesthetic effect that inspires a sense of wonder. But *Imagination, Dead Imagine* is more complex: the huge head is a computer melding of male and female features. This genderless supplicant offers no point of identification for the

viewer. Instead, that abject image, deluged with sickening substances, serves as a grim reminder of the permeability of all boundaries, physical and psychological.

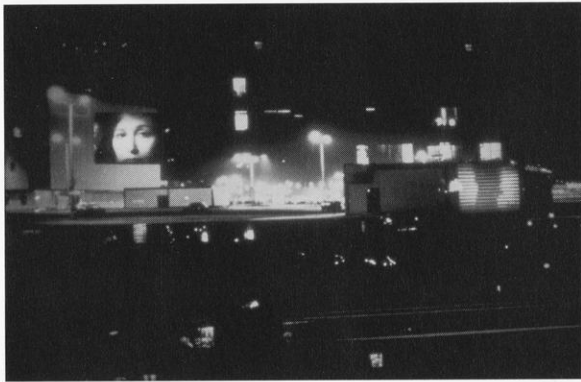
Like many contemporary artists, Barry attempts to understand the nature of identity and gender through an interrogation of the body. But unlike other artists, who examine the body as an expressive medium or as a record of social effects, she views the body itself as a convention, a cultural construction. In her work, the body is treated not as an inert object to be observed but

¹¹ On Goethe's color theory, see *ibid.*, pp. 67–74.



Judith Barry, alt. youth media, 1996

as a collection of disjointed effects which are both productive and manipulable. Barry is less concerned with transforming negative stereotypes than with trying to explore the specific means by which “the real” is constructed, made to seem viable and authentic, and enforced in the psyche of individual viewers, consumers, and workers. She therefore tries to reconstruct the setting for the construction of subjectivity. But in the process she challenges all notions of fixed or stable identities, or spaces for that matter.



Judith Barry,
*In the Shadow
of the City...*
Vamp r y,
1982-85

Rather than defining some new experience of the body, *Model for Stage and Screen* and *Imagination, Dead* pose a more politically challenging task: to rethink the subject in terms of the psychological and perceptual changes brought about by imaginary relations in space — the space of fantasy. If recent theories about subjectivity and the body have emphasized its constructed nature (gender as socially formed rather than biological), they have also pointed to the ways in which all forms of identity are performed. Literary theorist Judith Butler, in particular, has stressed the performative nature of subject formation, that is, the way in which one’s identity is shaped by an accretion of repeated

imitations of socially available models. This means that rather than an autonomous, biologically sexed person who seeks consciously to acquire or build an identity, what comes first is a set of boundaries, prohibitions, and inducements to replicate already existing types. One establishes an individual identity through the inevitable misreadings of these signs or through deliberately parodic imitations or deviations.

In other words, there is an area of misquotation, fiction, misappropriation and fantasy in our construction of subjectivity — and in what we regard as real. Butler even argues that “the real is a syntactically regulated phantasm that has enormous power and efficacy.”¹² Thus, what we understand as reality is, in fact, based on a powerfully reinforced fantasy. Psychoanalytic theorists Jean Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis put it another way; they say that fantasy constitutes a dimension of the real. They describe fantasy as operating in a two-stage process: first, a multiplication of the subject’s points of phantasmatic identification and, second, the subject’s acceptance of the coherence of the fantasy. “Fantasy is not the

object of desire,” Laplanche and Pontalis write, “but its setting. In fantasy the subject does not pursue the object or its sign; one appears oneself caught up in the sequence of images. One forms no representation of the desired object, but is oneself represented as participating in the scene although, in the earliest forms of fantasy, one cannot be assigned any fixed place in it.”¹³

Fantasy, then, not only precludes the unitary subject (and the corollary notion of a desiring subject who



Judith Barry,
First + Third,
1987

¹² Judith Butler, “The Force of Fantasy: Feminism, Mapplethorpe, and Discursive Excess,” *Differences*, no. 2 (Summer 1990), pp. 105-35.

¹³ Laplanche and Pontalis, quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 109-110.

projects a wish that is fulfilled by the fantasy) but literally structures the space in which the fragmentation and dissemination of the subject takes place. This notion of the dispersion of points of identification in fantasy is critical for understanding Barry's link between architecture and subject formation, and echoes in many ways her desire to extend the collective fantasy space of the movie screen. In works like *Model for Stage and Screen* and *Imagination, Dead Imagine*, Barry similarly demonstrates the necessary mobility of subject positions and unhinges the idea of fixed identity.

Both the process of rethinking the representation of the body and its panicked backlash in the recent culture wars reflect an underlying fear over the dissolution of the key element of Western metaphysics: the unified subject. After all, if postmodernism and poststructuralism have been about the unsettling of Western notions of knowledge and subjectivity, what comes next? How do we understand the human subject after humanism? How do we conceive gender if the conventional notions of male and female are eradicated by performativity? Such questions are not merely theoretical. With concrete redefinitions of the body in science, medicine and technology, we are today confronting nothing less than a reconfiguring of humanity in a posthumanist time. This requires new formations of identity. If Barry builds models or reconstructions of the fantasy setting of identity formation, it is to propose a more critical model of posthumanist subjectivity — one that is spectacular, specifically sited, always unfixd, always in the process of being produced.

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*Judith Barry,
Model for Stage
and Screen,
1987*

