

Review: Judith Barry „Body Without Limits“

Museu Colecção Berardo, Lisbon, Portugal. Curated by Luís Serpa.
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People in daily life seem to be permanently occupied with themselves. In fact, one could put it the other way round and say that life seems to be a long road one has to walk in order to try and find out the meaning and significance of the self. The human body is the agent, the means of connection between the inner self and the world. Bodies - mine, yours, hers, his' - are mirrored in daily situations, in the small and unnoticed moments everybody is familiar with but forgets to be conscious about. In the retrospective, multi-sensual show at the Museo Berardo Collecção in Lisbon, Portugal, the American video artist Judith Barry (b. 1954) registers the facets of bodily actions, their peculiarity and singularity and their, sometimes, humorist features. Being a pioneer in the field of installation and video work, naturally the main focus lied on video works along with several series of photographs.

In a broader sense the title was the concept for the collection of exhibited works that displayed multiple perspectives on the human body and bodily experience.

The self, one's own body, its experience within a social context and the external perspective on it were the structures that Barry explored in several media. On a meta-level, the relation between the video as medium and the body and the process of mediatization came thematically into play. As integrated into the discovering process of how the human body is constructed within a social context, video takes over the role of rendering this process visible and transmittable to a wider audience.

Following the flow of the walkabout, the visitor was guided from one large sized video installation to the next, with smaller works in between, for example a series of photographs, that loosened up the density of the video works.

The first piece, „*Study for the Mirror and Garden*“, was a large-sized, two channel video projection on four canvases set up in the form of a star with additional mirrors that reflected the projection endlessly.

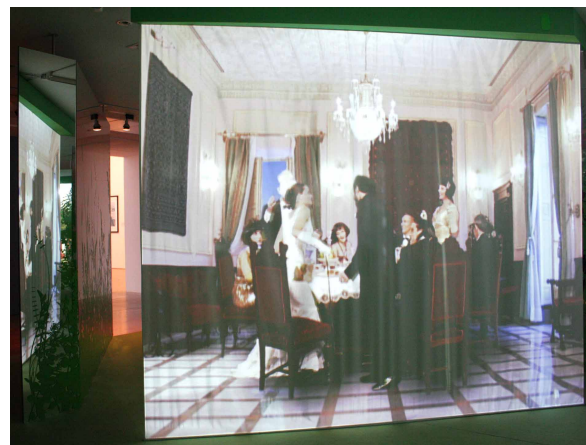


Fig. 1 and 2.: *Study for the Mirror and Garden, Redux 2008.*

Two-channel sound projection - with mirrors.
10. minutes, looped. Fotos: Andrea Heister



Barry refers in this piece to the Spanish tradition and, in particular, to the regional culture of Granada. Granada, where the work was conceived, captured the artists' attention due to the concurrence of three aspects: the *converso* tradition, which means the literary method of sending secret, encoded messages in texts. The method was used by discriminated communities such as the Jews or the Moors in order to communicate. The second regional aspect is the architectural peculiarity of secret gardens, called *carmens*, enclosed in Granadan homes and, thirdly, the populations' empathy for their diverse culture with traces of the Moorish or Gipsy style.

The references are expressed by the artist in her aesthetic concept of adding floral decorum on the projections backgrounds and by using narration. The literary character of "La Celestina" reanimates not only the *conversa* tradition, but also gives insight into the aristocratic and royal life. The female narrative voice tells her story, portraying at the same time a woman's life as procuress in the 16th century, a person whose challenge consists in finding the balance between power and devotion, avidity and modesty, ratio and emotion. Barry refers in this not only to the Spanish writer Fernando de Roja, but plays also with known historical images: the picture of a Manet-inspired setting of "Breakfast at the Open Air" or the dinner table in the English 19th century.

Sophisticated show indicate her as a highly trained video artist. This work also shows her work with different layers of content and her play of several perspectives.

In "*Imagination, Dead Imagine*", another video projection screened on three large-size canvases that formed a cube, Barry pursued and deepened the topic of bodily reaction.

The spectators see the close up of a face on which divers unspecified liquids are spilled. Like a real head, one could circumnavigate the installation in a 360° radius.

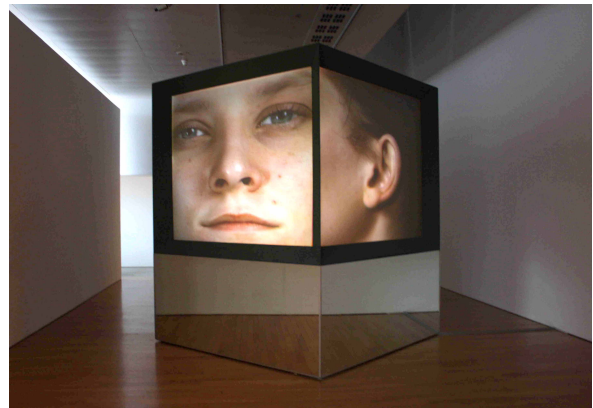
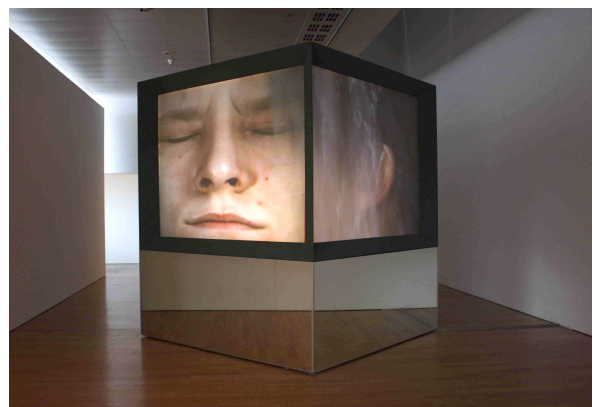


Fig. 3 and 4: *Imagination, dead imagine*. 1991. Installation. Five-channel video-sound projection. 15. minutes, looped. Fotos: Andrea Heister.



The video registers the action of spilling and the facial response, its mimic. A procedure that resembles the stimulus-reaction scheme used

in applied sciences. Completely at the mercy of somebody else, the close up portrays in detail the game of controlled and reflex-released motion. Some spectators hesitate to turn away, turned off by the slight feeling of disgust caused by the direct attendance of corporal processes. Some interpret it metaphorically as symbol for the exposure to circumstances and a life in general, which they feel stuck to passively.

Through the complete elimination of traces or hints of the sex, Barry introduces androgyny as a predominant impression keeping the viewer at a certain distance and preventing her/him from an identification with the subject.

Inasmuch as the face is the most exposed part of the body, it is the interface to communicate feelings and, besides sound, a non-verbal language. Every human being learns to read facial expressions and its mimic in the very first days of life. Barry's close up monumentalizes this expressive body part, wrests it out of its function and turns it into an object of observation and experimentation.

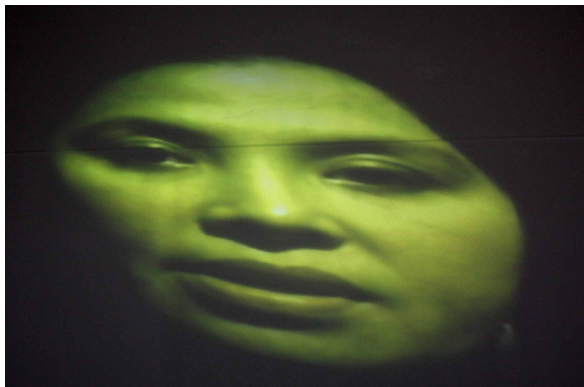


Fig. 5: „Not Reconciled“. 1987.

Installation. Video projection of short first person narratives. 2 minutes per story, looped.

Foto: Andrea Heister.

In contrast to this, a series of video screenings, located at the end of the exhibition in a tight and sparsely illuminated hallway, presented intimate avowals and confessions of immigrants. The projections were part of „Not Reconciled“, an ongoing series of stories from people of different cultures and countries which the artist collected over the last 15 years. Conducted in different places, in London, Rotterdam and Corsica, it now takes place in Cairo. In the mode of short first person narratives with the length of about 2 min., immigrants, mostly women, articulate their impressions on life in the USA and in the reality of the American dream. Reflecting their life backwards, the expectations, imaginations or disappointments are revealed. In a minimalist concept, Barry displayed the people in frontal face-to-face positions as talking heads in a green toned light, which renders the atmosphere close and intimate and allowed an intense encounter with the individual and her story. With calm and insistent voices, the persons tell of their impressions and open up to the viewer, who starts pondering hers/his own ideas about the construct of subjectivity within different cultures, ending up the question of his personal self and subject.

The dream of a better life, self-actualization, independence, liberty and respect – ideas that many relate with the American dream – was the theme people meditated about, looking back on their lives in which many faced the problems of immigration, the feeling of being a stranger to others and to themselves.

Divers senses, meanings and viewpoints of life and its subjective significations arise. The stimulating potential of this work completed the walkabout, leading the viewer to own thoughts about the topics.

Concluding

The selected works in the exhibition provided a profound idea about the work body, of her subjects, and her work style. The mixture between large sized walk-in video installation, projections and photo series proved the artists' di-

versity of technology, artistic means and spectator-oriented approach. Impressive were the number of exhibited works which allowed a sincere engagement in the artists' ideas.

Yet the title of the exhibition was misleading, since “Body without limits” laid too much weight on the literal interpretation of the notion “body” whereas Barry plays in her work with the perspectives on the body, the human personality and self-construction. From more neutral, scientific, to lyric and poetic pieces, one can see a broad variety of playful approaches and interpretations realized within the scope of video art.

Another deficit of the exhibition was the sparsely illuminated texts that explained the exhibited pieces. This made it hard to gather theoretical information for those interested in, for example, the artists' statement. Since Barry's ideas were quite complex and made references to historical events, an easier access to more information would have been desirable.

Figures

Courtesy of Rosamund Felsen Gallery.

Bibliography

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Author

Andrea Heister studied philosophy at the Munich School of Philosophy, art education at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in Munich and visual arts and media at the Université de Québec à Montréal. She is currently working on her PhD project on contemporary African art at the Free University, Berlin.

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