

Judith Barry

Imagination, Dead Imagine

1991

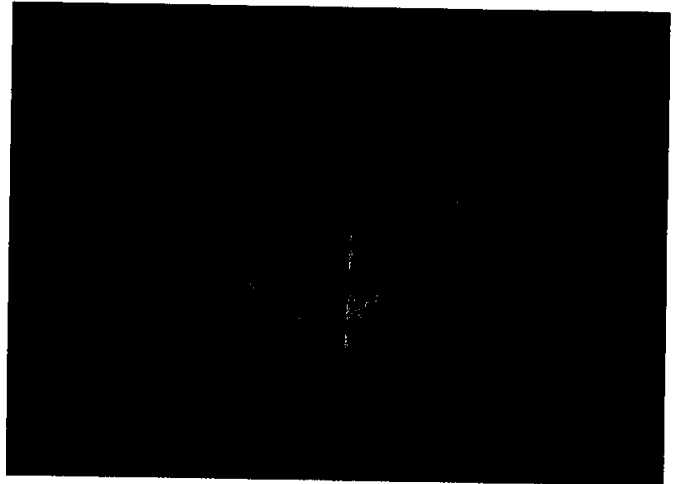
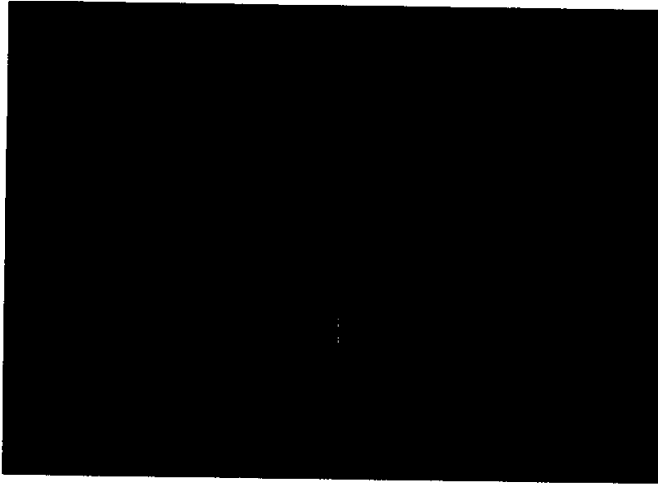
five-channel video projection with mirrored cube / mirror, wood, video projection / color, sound /
200 x 253.5 x 253.5 cm



Imagination, Dead Imagine
1991
installation views: ZKM |
Center for Art and Media
Karlsruhe, 2002
courtesy Collection of
Contemporary Art Fundación
"la Caixa," Barcelona
photos © Franz Wamhof

One of the questions that animates my practice as an artist who works across a variety of mediums, including exhibition design, is the notion of how the image world might be rendered inhabitable. Early on in my consideration of this question, I experimented with assumptions about how architecture might be conceived of differently: as not primarily the physical manifestation of the building per se, but instead as the translation into built form of our lived social relations. Foregrounding discourse and translation as the primary, not secondary, generators of the built world freed me to introduce other discourses (including ones of representation) into questions around the materiality of what constitutes the "built" and the "not built." Rather than regarding these terms as oppositional, I consider them to operate along a continuum. This allows me to much more fluidly transform the nature of the relations that accrue between them.

More and more, as social life has become increasingly dematerialized through globalization and new technologies, I have turned to installation as a way to interrogate specific questions within a constructed physical environment often also comprised of



Imagination, Dead Imagine
1991
five-channel video projection
with mirrored cube
mirror, wood, video projection
color, sound
295 x 253.5 x 253.5 cm
installation views: Fundación
"la Caixa," Barcelona, 1991
courtesy Collection of
Contemporary Art Fundación
"la Caixa," Barcelona
photos courtesy "la Caixa,"
Barcelona; Rosamund Felsen,
Gallery, Los Angeles

various mediums. For each project, the questions are different.

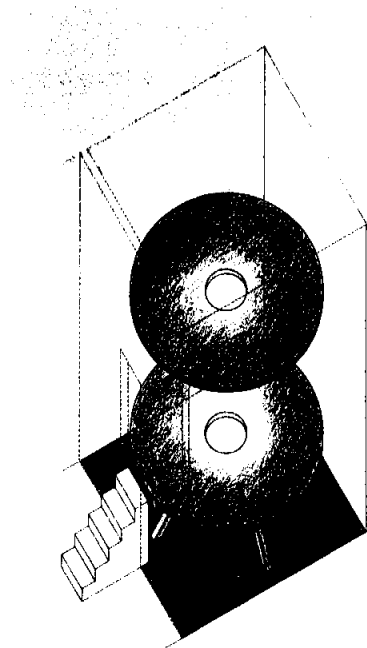
The hybridity of installation encourages the introduction of other disciplines. From dance and performance I have experimented with notions of how space might be experienced more viscerally, such that "the performative" is part of all my installations. Consequently, the viewer is active, not passive. This performative aspect means that in order to engage with a work, the viewer must construct it through physical engagement. Further, as new technologies have made possible indeterminate interactivity – on the web in particular – I have begun to create more event-driven structures whereby the viewing of the work becomes secondary to the using of the space. The user is now responsible for his or her own trajectory through the experience of the installation. Similarly, my notions of the performative also incorporate various forms of address directly within the work; this allows the user/viewer to find specific places within a work where different experiences can occur. To underscore these places, I construct "subject positions" that the user/viewer inhabits. I use montage (from the language of film/video) as well as,

more recently, 3-D modeling and animation techniques in order to make places that are believable and inhabitable yet at the same time imaginary.

I want to describe four projects that relate to the questions articulated in the "Future Cinema" exhibition.

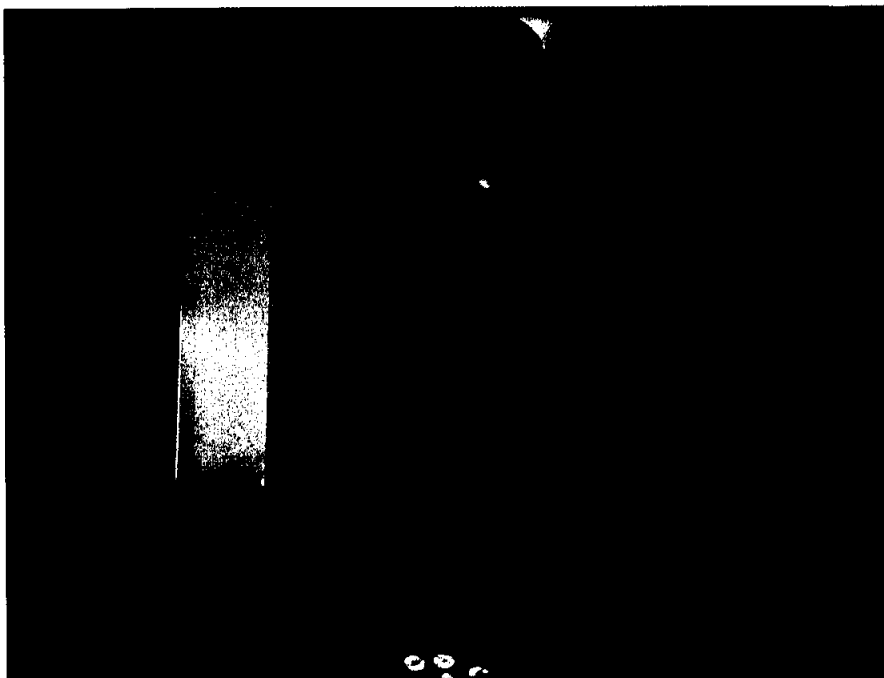
Model for stage and screen (1987) is designed to turn the viewer into a projector. I was interested in some of the nineteenth-century experiments in vision that Goethe and others explored as they tried to account for how we see. In particular, I was curious about the relationship between what you see and what you think you see as this is produced at the moment of seeing. I wondered about the arbitrary nature of sensation in relation to vision at that moment where spectatorship and the potential for spectacle meet.

Two discs are suspended in an enclosed chamber in such a way that there is just enough room for one viewer to squeeze into the space between them. Although the viewer can clearly see how the light and fog project out of the lower disc, after a short time most viewers begin to experience a variety of retinal effects such as visions or hallucinations. One common



left
conceptual drawing
for the installation
Model for stage and screen
1987
courtesy Galleria Mario Pieroni,
American Academy, Rome

right
Model for stage and screen
1987
installation
wood, paint, light, fog
25.4 x 25.4 x 25.4 cm
installation view: Galleria Mario
Pieroni, Rome, 1987
courtesy Galleria Mario Pieroni,
American Academy, Rome
photo courtesy Galleria Mario
Pieroni, Rome, Galerie Karin
Sachs, Munich, Galerie Xavier
Hufkens, Brussels



experience is the sensation that the room itself is receding as one looks through the fog and light, and that the distance is increasing between oneself and the outer edges of the room. For most people, this sensation is uncomfortable. But escaping the chamber through the antechamber provides no release, since most viewers experience retinal excitation at the very moment they expected to regain control over their vision. They see the complementary color of the light from the chamber projected onto the antechamber walls.

In *The Work of the Forest* (1992) I used the Proustian image of nineteenth-century interiority – the whirling room – as a structuring device to produce a panorama. Walter Benjamin conceived a sense of history that could come to terms with technology and the shifting categories of the representations of nature. For him, it is the juxtaposition of text and image over time which elucidates historical truth. This “dialectics of seeing” crystallizes antithetical elements by providing axes for their alignment. I adapted Benjamin’s montage theory to the conflicting histories of Belgian colonial activities in Africa and the specifically Belgian form of Art Nouveau by rendering an endless surround produced by a continuously panning image. This seemed an appropriate way to stage the competing and conflicting relations between colonial expansion, utopian architecture, fin-de-siècle politics and World’s Fair ideology.

The structure of *The Work of the Forest* is designed to provide several viewing positions, and hence several points of view. From above, the viewer has the comfort and authority people generally associate with monocular perspective and classical Hollywood cinema. The view from the center is the most disorienting: the panorama itself disrupts a sense of closure. From this position it becomes clear that each screen has a different soundtrack, and so the meaning of the images changes. A third view from the exterior circumference (outside) seemingly allows the viewer to predict the sequences seen through the transparent screens; it is the one from which the viewer can best deconstruct the competing

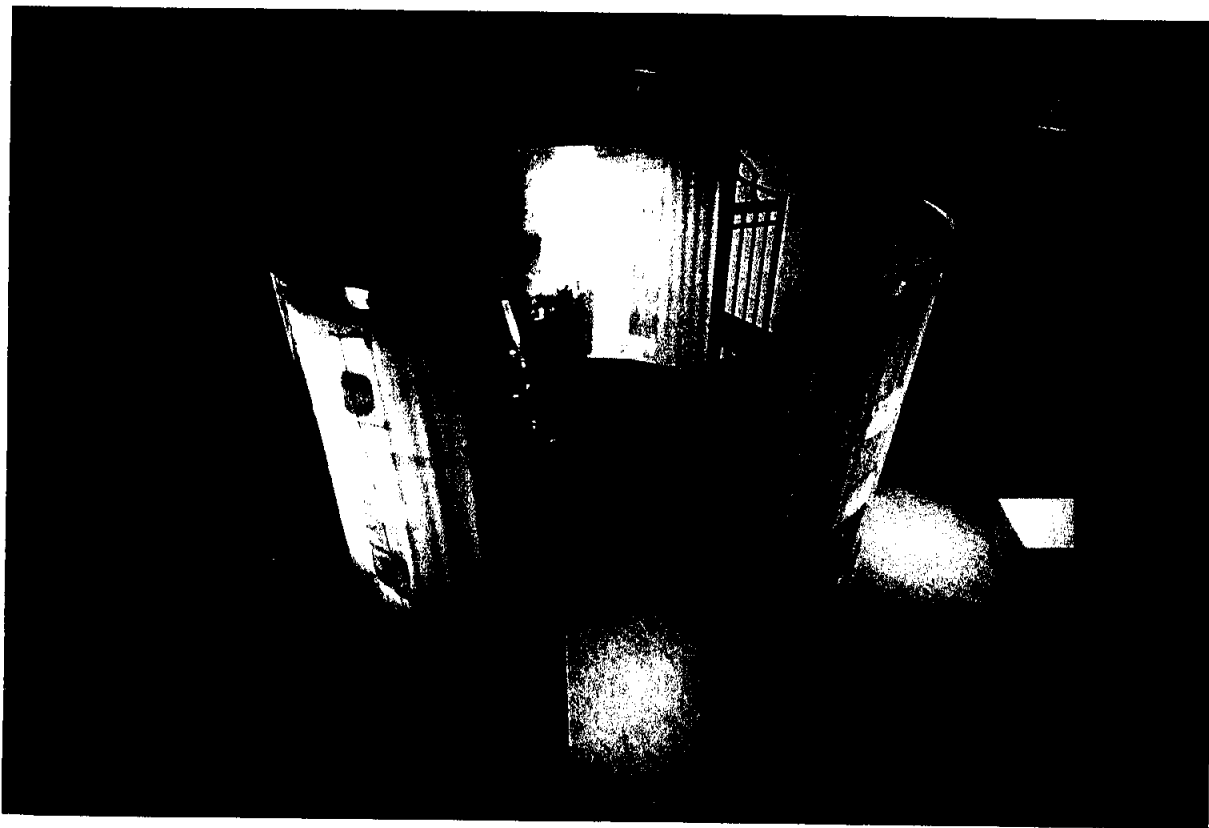
montage elements as they produce their meaning.

For Imagination, Dead Imagine (1991) an androgynous head is projected as if contained within a mirrored Minimalist cube. Sounds of the head slowly breathing fill the space. The head is serene, waiting. Suddenly a substance pours over it from all sides, drenching it in what appears to be a bodily fluid. The spectator wants to turn away, but cannot. Horror at the repulsive nature of the substances is replaced by fascination with their beauty as they apparently change into majestic but abstract landscapes.

In conceiving this project I was interested in exploring the legacy of Minimal Art, particularly Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the primacy of lived bodily experience established as an internal horizon that produces meaning. I read Minimalism through several competing registers. First, through its insistence on an immediacy of experience understood through the body, although at the same time Minimalism eliminated any overt reference to the body beyond, through the way this elision of the body finds an echo in the history of aesthetics, and in the sublime in particular. In the eighteenth century, the power and terror of nature unleashed intimations of infinity and deity, dwarfing the observer who, aspiring to transcendence, never forgot his insignificance. Third, through Julia Kristeva’s exploration of the subjective experience set out, in her reading of the “abject,” by the use of bodily fluids: “These bodily fluids, thus what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty on the part of death. There I am at the border of my condition as a living being. Such waste drops so that I might live, until from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit. [...] It is death infecting life. Abject.” Finally, in the title *Imagination, Dead Imagine* I wanted to invoke Samuel Beckett’s work, since I was commenting on the horror vacuum I saw as a condition of this experience.

Speedflesh (1997–98) is an immersive, interactive video-sound narrative that takes place in a 360-degree point-of-view theater. You are in the center of a world that is moving away from you at rapid speed. A woman floats toward you and then

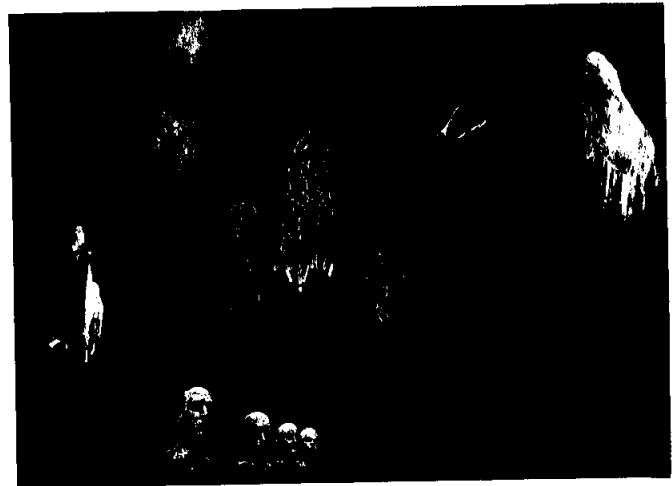
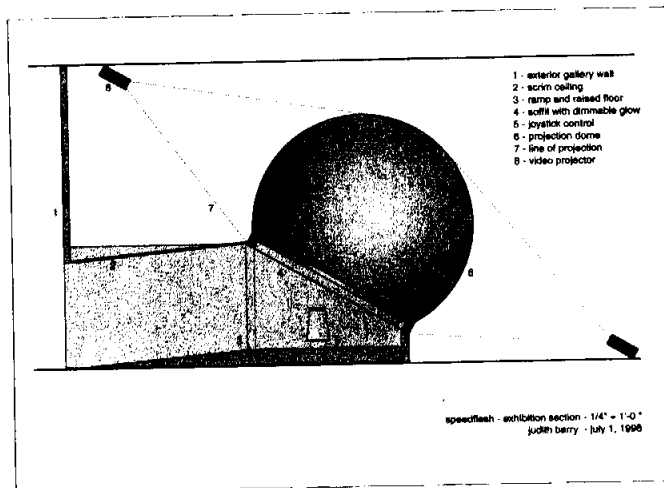
For a longer discussion, see “Model for stage and screen” in *Public Fantasy*, Hlavizick [ed.], ICA, London, 1991.



The Work of the Forest
1992
Three-channel video projection
panorama on three transparent
art nouveau screens,
wood, silk, video
dimensions variable
installation views: Fondation
pour l'architecture, Brussels,
1992
photos courtesy Fondation
pour l'architecture, Brussels;
Galerie Hubert Winkler, Vienna



Judith Barry, Brad Miskell
Speedflesh
 1997-98
 360-degree video projection
 with sound
 dimensions variable
 screenshots
 courtesy Wexner Center
 for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio
 photos courtesy Luis Barragán
 Galeria, Lisbon



left
 conceptual drawing for
 the 360-degree video/sound
 projection *Speedflesh*
 by Judith Barry, Brad Miskell
 1997-98

right
 composite image/study
 for the 360-degree video/sound
 projection *Speedflesh*

away, elongated through the anamorphosis produced through the projection. Her movements seem to conceal and sometimes reveal the four characters whose lives seem to be caught/displayed in the band of light as it closes in around you. You can engage with the narrative by turning the wheel at the center of the surround and "tuning in" to the last five minutes in the lives of these characters. As each character's point of view is projected 360 degrees around the viewer, you experience the narrative through that character's eyes.

The structure of the work, the 360-degree projection, has antecedents in the history of the anamorphic image: a history that figures not only throughout the narratives of representation, but also marks the Neoplatonic period and recalls the power of hidden iconographies to describe new social orders. In using the anamorphosis as the form/content of the imagery of *Speedflesh*, we were on one level attempting to show that even an apocalyptic moment poses other histories that, although visible if you can decode them, will not necessarily be exhausted by this process. Similarly, while this work seems to propose a relation with André Bazin's notion of a "total cinema," its narrative structure implies indeterminacy, not order, as it strives to escape the boundaries of a "realist" representational model.

Whole Potatoes from Mashed was originally commissioned for the exhibition, "on taking a normal situation and translating it into multiple and overlapping discourses" at the MuHKA in 1993 when Antwerp was European City of Culture. The exhibition title, a quote from Gordon Matta-Clark, was the linchpin around which the show was organized, as Matta-Clark's work

formed the genesis of the museum collection. I was intrigued by the title and began to investigate more thoroughly what these words had meant for Matta Clark, and also to look more closely at the effects of discourses, multiple and overlapping, on the city of Antwerp. The questions that animated the research included a notion of how words have been used to provide a transformative moment – a moment made physical, a moment that seemingly like magic can move at the speed of thought.

My research led me to several discursive systems unique to Antwerp: to the sixteenth-century Plantin Moretus printing house that published many alchemical treatises;¹ and to the "beguines," those homes for sixteenth-century minstrel woman whose explicit "love" poems to "God" were deemed blasphemous, even as they transformed all listeners. And I began to see the speed at which discourses can move as a kind of magic. This research led me to conceive of the form of this piece as a way of looking at how language moving at the speed of thought is a form of magic.

This project combines a number of different discourses and seemingly disparate areas of inquiry in order to make a relatively simple point. Something that we all know, but perhaps don't think about, which is that materials, matter, have a history. But it is not enough to merely recount this history as a series of bald facts (as though such a tale were plausible). No. For history is not one story, but many. It is a process of accretion over time, and it is specific, both to Antwerp, a city with a past, and also to other places, places that it has passed through, is passing through on its way, somewhere else. How matter might be thought about is the subject of this work. What matters – what is the matter? How it matters

¹ Alchemical treatises are heretical texts which if read in the right way produced a transformation in the reader.



Whole Potatoes from Mashod
1993
mixed-media fiber-optic/sound
installation
rug, cables, voice coders,
sensors, strobe, glossary
dimensions variable
installation view:
MuHKA, Antwerp, 1993
Judith Barry
courtesy Judith Barry
and Luis Serpa Projeção, Lisbon
photo courtesy Judith Barry

This sounds silly in American English. It may be untranslatable in Dutch. Is there something beyond language that we can get at, that remains after thought has disappeared? Yes of course, we all know this and for some of us, that is one of the functions of art. The visual cannot be completely described by language. Matter is what fills up space. Language is something else. The question for a history of matter is where do they meet, and what happens. Language is multiple, diffuse, transparent. Perhaps Marshall McLuhan was correct when he suggested that the shift from a literate, phonetic alphabet culture to an electronic medium would produce a kind of "electronic feudalism." This was an idea that he based on the notion that before mechanized print was invented, each manuscript had to be "looked" at, because it reflected its author in a way that is very different from the contemporary act of reading. As we read, the "Gestalt" of the manuscript disappears, and the print becomes a transparent medium that conveys the ideas of the author. With electronic image-based media, including many computer-based magazines such as *Wired* or *Ray Gun*, and with many artist-book projects, we have returned to a situation where we must look, assemble the image of the words, in order for the page to yield its meanings. In other words, if the page is not invisible, it has substance which must be read. A few hundred years ago, in the dark forest of Europe, peasants and woodcutters might tell each other stories about a man who rescued a wounded animal or a stricken princess and was rewarded with a magic ring. All the man had to do was to wish for something with the ring, and his wish would be granted. Stories like this are always short. Narrative struggle is absent, the impossible is accomplished at the speed of thought. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, with scarcity all around us, we find ourselves once more hovering on the edge of the magical. And the ring of power is no longer contained in a fable, but in an engineering project in a laboratory all over the world.

What you see before you is a landscape, a landscape made of words and light. In your hand, you have a glossary, a dictionary, which you can use to put order into this landscape, to shape this landscape into any form that you might wish it to take. It is not interactive in the sense that you can overtly effect it, yet it will yield to you any meanings you choose to give it. It is right there waiting for you.

What happens: Fiber optics in a matrix fills the room. You hear one sound, then another, then another. As the sounds, then the words, pass in the air, you see the space light up around you, behind you, above you. You notice that the light lasts exactly as long as it takes to make the sound. As the words reach the end of the fiber you notice that there is a relationship between the light that you see and the duration of the sound. As the words travel faster and faster and come with more rapidity, the sounds multiply and become more densely layered. The matrix responds by becoming lighter and more fluid. Gradually you realize that there is a specific relation between the words and the fibers, but that it is not one to one. The words take flight moving in a number of directions, producing a multiplicity of meanings. Taking you one place, then another, then another. Hovering on the edge of meaning, beyond the concern for sense. You collapse into thought. But the sounds take you through the light as you watch them try to represent themselves. You follow a thought from one place to another, finding yourself here and then away. You are alone at the speed of thought.

It doesn't want to make sense, but you do. How this works is left to chance. But you can't do that. You must hear voices, create meaning. Find order. In the white light that makes itself into images before your eyes, you can see everything. In the white noise that is a constant chant, you escape.

Judith Barry