

TRANSPARENCY AND ECOCRITICAL ART: SEEING ART HISTORY THROUGH (TO) ALICIA BARNEY'S *YUMBO*

TRANSPARÊNCIA E ARTE ECOCRÍTICA: VENDO A HISTÓRIA DA ARTE A PARTIR DE *YUMBO* DE ALICIA BARNEY

Abstract: Alicia Barney's *Yumbo* (1980/2008), an ecocritical artwork that makes air pollution visible, is itself virtually invisible within art history. It does not appear even within specific histories of ecological art. This work that is made up of glass cubes provides a basis to reflect upon physical and conceptual transparency, values, and art historical canon formation. Looking at overlooked works such as *Yumbo*, and seeing them together with more recent ecocritical artworks by women, such as Amy Balkin's *Public Smog* (2004–2014), creates an ecofeminist genealogy with the agency to visibilize more clearly possibilities beyond the Western-style man-handling of nature. Simultaneously, the creation of such a genealogy helps change the master narratives of art history.

Keywords: Transparency; Ecocritical art; Ecofeminist genealogy

Resumo: *Yumbo* de Alicia Barney (1980/2008) é uma obra de arte ecocrítica que torna visível a poluição do ar e é praticamente invisível na história da arte. Não aparece nem em histórias específicas da arte ecológica. Este trabalho, composto de cubos de vidro que fornece uma base para refletir sobre a transparência física e conceitual, os valores e a formação de cânones históricos da arte. Olhar obras negligenciadas como *Yumbo* e vê-las juntamente com obras de arte ecocríticas mais recentes de mulheres, como *Public Smog* de Amy Balkin (2004–2014), criando uma genealogia ecofeminista, permitindo uma visualização mais clara de possibilidades além do estilo ocidental de controle da natureza. Simultaneamente, a criação dessa genealogia ajuda a mudar as narrativas mestras da história da arte.

Palavras-chave: Transparência; Arte ecocrítica; Genealogia ecofeminista

Transparency is a fascinating quality, involving seeing and not seeing simultaneously: seeing one thing precisely because you can look right through another thing without noticing it. Unsurprisingly, the word “transparent” used conceptually has

opposite meanings. Most commonly, it indicates that which is easily perceived, unhidden, open to scrutiny. In the field of computing, though, it describes processes or interfaces that function without the user being aware of them. Returning to the physical, transparent

material is changeable, tricky. Light passes through it, and you clearly view whatever is on the other side, and then, with a slight shift of perspective, light bounces off of it, and you see instead a reflection, perhaps of yourself. Either way, the transparent material maintains a superficial invisibility.

I focus on transparency, both physical and conceptual, in relation to *Yumbo* by Colombian artist Alicia Barney (b. 1952), beginning with a photograph of the artwork. Barney made *Yumbo* in 1980 and recreated it in 2008. The photograph shows what remains of the original work—lined up against the wall—and the recreation—laid out perpendicular to the original. Neither *Yumbo* nor Barney are well known. They are virtually invisible within art history. I want to look at and through *Yumbo*, to examine the power of its transparency. Within art history, metaphorically, I want to shift the light, or our perspective, so that what was previously unnoticed gives us a reflection of ourselves.



Alicia Barney. *Yumbo*, 1980/2008. 47 glass cubes and particulates, 20 x 20 x 20 cm each. Photograph by José Kattan. Courtesy of the artist.

In the photograph, we notice the precise, repeated form of the cube. Especially visible are the edges, which appear clearly delineated as dark lines. We see that the cubes are made of transparent material since we discern the checkered pattern of the tiled floor through the tops of some of them. The right sides of the cubes, though, reflect the light, mirroring the floor. Vision is strained when we attempt to count the units since those in the back of the diagonal row are optically compressed.

What do we make of this seemingly straightforward yet visually complicated artwork? Perhaps we see a reasonable system, or a pattern, especially in this venue with its checkerboard floor tiles. Perhaps we see architecture, an echo of the “white cube” of the gallery itself. Maybe we see a series of minimalist objects. For viewers with knowledge of art history, Barney’s cubes may conjure any number of more famous ones, like Hans Haacke’s *Condensation Cube*, 1963–65 (LARSEN, 2018).

What we do not see is what Barney intended to make visible: the particulate air pollution deposited within the transparent containers. Barney originally created *Yumbo* in 1980. Early on February 1 of that leap-year, she went to a site in *Yumbo*, an industrial city adjacent to Cali, Colombia. There she placed twenty-nine identical glass cubes, without their tops.¹ She returned

the following morning, and each subsequent morning that month, to retrieve and cap a cube, each grimmer than the previous as they collected particulate matter from the air, making visible the cumulative effects of pollution. In 1980, such pollution was increasing with industrial emissions. One major polluter, for example, was the Swiss-based multinational Eternit, known for its trademarked asbestos fiber cement (VILLAMIZAR, 2012). The cement industry is currently responsible for about 5–7% of human-generated CO₂, also emitting nitrogen and sulfur compounds, metals, and other air pollutants (STAJANCA; ESTOKOVÁ, 2012). Companies like Eternit established themselves in *Yumbo* beginning after World War II, in a period of rapid industrialization and urban growth (VÁSQUEZ, 1990, p. 14).

***Yumbo* is the first of many ecocritical artworks** Barney produced and the first contemporary ecocritical artwork created or exhibited in Colombia. Barney is best-known for such work that exposes the environmental damage resulting from factors such as the increased presence of industry, a more concentrated urbanization, and lack of government regulation, yet even within her native country her artwork lacks deserved prominence. One of my goals is to contribute to the visibility of her work within art history, and in doing so to create a new view of ecocritical art.

Reasons for *Yumbo's* lack of visibility are complicated and include the artwork's very nature: the transparency of the glass cubes and the minuscule scale of the particulates makes it difficult to capture photographically. But certainly, the invisibility is also indicative of larger trends linked to the art historical canon's sexism and Euro- and US-centrism. In their treatment of contemporary environmental and ecological art's origins, art histories concentrate overwhelmingly on the large-scale works of male artists like Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, and Alan Sonfist. In fact, *Earthworks*, the most famous form of early environmental art—generally conceived of as seminal in histories of ecocritical art—has been presented as if it *requires* “the strength, muscularity and stamina traditionally associated with masculine power” (BOETTGER, 2004, p. 55). Although some female environmental and ecological artists, such as Nancy Holt and Helen Mayer Harrison (in collaboration with her husband Newton Harrison) have a place in the canon, many innovative women who pioneered both environmental and ecological art do not (WILDY, 2011), including Barney. Furthermore, surveys of this kind of art infrequently include Latin American artists, like Ana Mendieta (1948–1985) or Cecilia Vicuña (b. 1948).

There is a parallel between the relative invisibility of ecocritical women artists and the quality of their artworks

that is particularly revealing of both valuation and values. Their artworks tend to be small-scale, fragile, immediate, and often ephemeral, qualities that can make them more difficult to see — especially over time — in comparison with the famous Earthworks.² Many women eco-artists intentionally rejected approaches to the environment that were huge, forceful, and highly visible, seeing in the aggressive reshaping of the land both machismo and Western civilization's attempts to control nature. Their decision to concentrate on subtle, minimal interventions follows a practice of walking lightly on the earth and valuing characteristics traditionally designated (and denigrated) as "feminine" (WILDY, 2011). Their formal decisions furthermore draw attention to the intangibility and mutability of many of the most important aspects of our ecosystems. Minimal or limited visibility — relative invisibility — can be both a metaphor for those aspects of material reality that we either cannot or do not see, because of our conceptual limitations and a catalyst for moving beyond an emphasis on the visual and strictly empirically-grounded approaches to understanding, to a consideration of other forms of experience and knowledge.

Returning to *Yumbo*, transparency is obviously a key characteristic, both as a physical attribute and concept. Barney used transparent material to promote conceptual transparency around the

problem of pollution — revealing its physical aspect as a step toward encouraging people to pay attention to it and, ideally, act to prevent it. But *Yumbo's* history demonstrates the trickiness, the ambiguities, of transparency, its links to both visibility and invisibility.

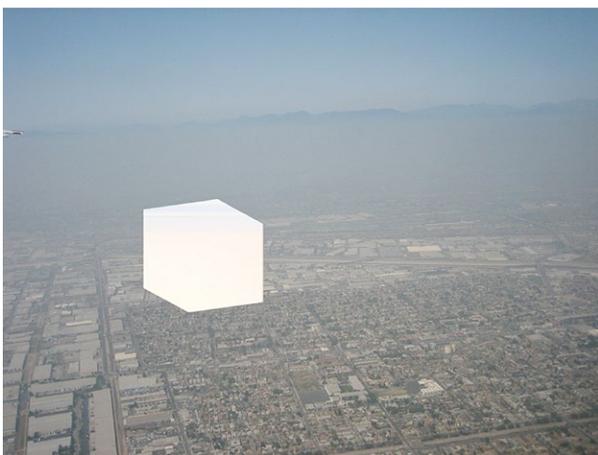
Taking the reduction of pollution as the ultimate goal of *Yumbo*, the work is a failure, as emphasized by its recreation twenty-eight years later. Its making-visible is insufficient. The failure of *Yumbo* in part derives from, or at least connects to, our society's enduring Enlightenment-era belief in science and in human's separation from and ability to control the natural world. Barney had been hopeful that, giving an audience clear empirical evidence, she might induce action. An activist at heart, Barney declared, "art should transform reality, not reproduce it" (GONZÁLEZ, 1979, p. 12).³ Her approach was in line with contemporaneous developments within the growing Colombian environmental movement, which aimed at giving proper visibility to ecological problems. The movement, ca. 1972–1983, was joined by university professors who denounced ecological degradation, becoming activist-scientists, tackling problems with scientific rigor rather than mere opinion (TOBASURA, 2003). Like these scientists, Barney presented empirical evidence of a problem. And *Yumbo* shows us "contamination that we suspect cannot be contained,

even if her series were to be extended indefinitely in rows and rows of specimen cubes with greasy, toxic nothingness" (LARSEN, 2018, p. 16–17). What is not visible in *Yumbo*, though, includes multinational companies' ability to impact or even to evade political and legal systems, and the nature of capitalism to incentivize the exploitation of natural resources, valuing profit above all: powerful invisible forces that are part of the larger ecosystem.

How to move forward, then, not only to create a place in ecocritical art history that acknowledges Barney's, and other women's, contributions but also helps to expand old projects beyond unachieved utopian proposals, to enable activist artworks to continue to *work*? Pioneering works such as *Yumbo* could be aligned with more recent ecocritical artworks by women, especially those dealing with the same issue in resonating but differing ways, in order to create an ecofeminist genealogy with the agency to visibilize more clearly possibilities beyond the Western-style man-handling of nature and to help change "the master story" (PLUMWOOD, 1993, p. 190).

For example, we can trace connections between *Yumbo* and Amy Balkin's *Public Smog* project that began in 2004. Visual images are only a small aspect of Balkin's project, which entails the complex process of buying up carbon emission credits that are

part of a market-based approach to pollution control (DEMOS, 2016). Balkin participates in this cap-and-trade system — and subverts it, though minimally — by retiring rather than using or trading acquired offsets, thus creating clean air. She visualized the result as fluctuating clean air "parks" over specific geographic locations such as Los Angeles (PUBLIC, n.d.). Such parks, a physical impossibility, are "speculative counter-spaces" (DONOVAN, 2011). That she pictured them as clean white cubes superimposed over smoggy skies connects them, in reverse, to Barney's *Yumbo*. Balkin's picture-cubes are opaque, their whiteness suggesting an erasure of filth, a containment of pure breathing space. The project's manifestation is less tangible than *Yumbo*, yet Balkin's approach to pollution control is active and direct, entangled with and revealing political, legal, and economic systems, as exposed by the paperwork that comprises part of the project's documentation. The project questions the efficacy, and transparency, of those systems.



Amy Balkin. *Public Smog over Los Angeles*, part of Public Smog project, 2004–2014. Courtesy of the artist.

When projects such as *Yumbo* and *Public Smog* are seen together, the transparent, virtually invisible cube comes to light as a foil in an incipient ecofeminist genealogy: a trace of the old and persistent systems that continue to frame, and to stymie, attempts to remediate environmental damage. But the transparent cube is also now visible as a tool that *has* been put to new critical uses, creatively

utilized to envision thinking — and acting — outside the box. As Balkin said, quoting Walter Benjamin, “One of the foremost tasks of art has always been the creation of a demand which could be fully satisfied only later” (DONOVAN, 2011). Art generates both desire and hope, necessary in order to visualize and achieve a better future. The inclusion of works like *Yumbo* in art history is not just about the past — not just reparation in the name of equity — but also about revealing a past that reflects us now, allowing a clear view of the history of our struggles in order to inspire us to see through to the future.

¹ Twelve cubes from the original artwork are lost or destroyed.

² Not to say that there are no small-scale works with a prominent place in the canon; Haacke’s *Condensation Cube* is an example.

³ Translation from Spanish is the author’s.

About the author: Gina McDaniel Tarver, associate professor at Texas State University, investigates modern and contemporary Colombian art and is the author of *The New Iconoclasts: From Art of a New Reality to Conceptual Art in Colombia, 1961–1975* (Universidad de los Andes, 2016).

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