

# RIFFS

Deutsche Bank's Artist of the Year 2011

Yto Barrada

March 18–April 22, 2012

**The  
Renaissance  
Society**

at The University of Chicago

In cooperation with  
Deutsche Bank



# The Renaissance Society

at The University of Chicago
5811 South Ellis Avenue
4th floor
Chicago, IL 60637

**Museum Hours**

Tuesday - Friday: 10 am - 5pm
Saturday, Sunday: 12- 5pm
Closed Mondays
http://www.renaissancesociety.org

# Yto Barrada

## Riffs

Deutsche Bank’s Artist of the Year 2011

### March 18–April 22, 2012

**Opening Reception: March 18, 4:00–7:00pm**

Featuring a talk with the artist from 5:00–6:00pm

Prior to securing its independence in 1956, Morocco was subject to joint colonial occupation. One of the many challenges facing King Mohammed V was uniting what had been its French and Spanish protectorates. Route de l’Unité (Unity Road), as its name makes clear, was a highly symbolic public works project. Conceived by left-wing politician and architect of independence Mehdi Ben Barka, the road was built by more than 10,000 Moroccan youth each volunteering a month of labor. Completed in 1963, it twists and winds 43 miles through the rugged Rif Mountains, linking Fez to Ketama.

In 2001, thirty-eight years after the road’s completion, Tangier-based artist Yto Barrada photographed Route de l’Unité. Framed front and center is an unremarkable stretch of road hosting almost no traffic. From a parched hillside, the artist chose a vista dwarfing the simple, nondescript brick structures scattered here and there. With decidedly nothing to celebrate, the image is as drought-stricken as the landscape. Before receding toward the horizon, the road zig-zags sharply, making a reverse “S” that threads together foreground, middleground, and background. More than space, the image depicts space over time, in which case the photograph’s perspective belongs as much to history as it does to the landscape proper. As for an historical perspective, the past is being weighed against a present in which Route de l’Unité has been drained of symbolism. This set of formal decisions certainly speaks to Ben Barka’s 1965 disappearance in Paris, an abduction many believe to have been carried out by foreign agents acting in concert with King Hassan II who sent Ben Barka into exile after accusing him of plotting against the state. In Barrada’s photograph, the aspirations once buoying national sovereignty have likewise disappeared, evaporating under the day’s broadest light.

Indeed, the Ben Barka affair aside, the years since the construction of Route de l’Unité have witnessed a weakening of national autonomy as states are at the mercy of an increasingly internationalized system of finance and production, a system commonly referred to as globalization. Yet, the erosion of national autonomy, whether it is understood as symptomatic of globalization or seen as foreshadowed in Ben Barka’s disappearance, is a narrative occurring outside the frame of Barrada’s photograph, and is absent to precisely the same degree as any tell-tale signs of the road’s initial symbolic significance. The result is a quotidian document in which the past, no matter how epic or fraught with ironic twists and turns of fate, has given way to an everyday present.

*Riffs* is a survey of Barrada’s photographs and film from 1999 to 2011. During that time, Barrada (b.1971) has chronicled developments in and around her hometown of Tangier, a city that has emerged as a poster child for key facets of globalization, from issues of foreign direct investment, to issues of immigration. Everywhere and nowhere, globalization is visible only in the form of traces. In the case of Barrada’s Tangier, these traces vary in directness. Whether it is as explicit an image as that of an all-female workforce in a prawn processing plant in one of the city’s free export zones, or as removed as



an image of native flora—photos intended to literally examine the “nature of place” as it were—Barrada’s work, insofar as it captures globalization, can only do so to the extent that it is visibly manifest in everyday life.

Barrada came to photography through her studies in political science at Sorbonne which she attended on and off until 1994. Part of the research for her dissertation involved West Bank roadblocks and the negotiation strategies of those who encountered military police upon trying to cross. While living in the West Bank, she began documenting her subject through photography. As the research evolved she found herself taking more photographs than notes. Regarding this shift she has stated:

The main part of describing what I was interested in became through photographs, because I discovered that it was less restrictive than only my dissertation in political science. I started to be interested in art and all the possibilities it gave me to introduce the political situation.

Accordingly, Barrada would go on to study at the International Center for Photography in New York in addition to attending an influential multi-year seminar at l’Ecole des Beaux-Arts with Jean-Francois Chevrier. As for “all the possibilities” art provided “to introduce the political situation,” Barrada would flesh out an initial documentary impulse to encompass a range of modes and genres—photojournalism,

work is not only the internal and external socio-economic forces driving change, it is also their effects, and most important the psychological atmosphere of a city that situated in an impoverished country is forced to stare at the Schengenized fortress Europe. Formally reminiscent of Caspar David Friedrich’s *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818), Barrada’s *Lazy Wall* (2001), which features an adolescent seated on a terrace, photographed from behind as he stares at the sea, illustrates sentiments born of the border’s geopolitics. Barrada describes the situation as a “life full of holes”:

People are standing there thinking all day how you’re going to make enough money to be able to cross, to pay your passage through... That state that I’ve described in my body of work creates a sort of floating figure...as a consequence of spending your time on the edge, on the jumping-off place of Africa, trying to get to the other side, you are turning your back on whatever is happening where you are.

The boom and bust cycles of development featured in Barrada’s images of forgotten foundations, sporadic patterns of exurban construction, and shanties juxtaposed against high-rises, is set against the languor of napping indigents, colonial ruins, and portraits of day dreamers. Based on Barrada’s work, Tangier’s state of transition is revealed to be simultaneously a state of suspension.

Although it shares demographic characteristics with other border cities undergoing transition as a result of globalization, Tangier is unique in that it is a border between continents and therefore worlds. It is home to a generationally ensconced community of expats who keep alive notions of Tangiers’ oft-romanticized interculturalism. Consequently, Tangier’s transition is occurring through disveeled layers of myth, history and, last but not least, nostalgia, which, according to Barrada’s images, finds its aesthetic corollary in dilapidation. But over and above mere nostalgia, what emerges through the wreckage of say, *Restaurant Villa Harris, figs. 1 & 2*, is a colonial past come again as a poltergeist whose wrath was directed at Club Med’s latter day occupation of this well known 1920s villa. Likewise, with respect to ghosts, the legal and illegal human traffic between Europe and Morocco occurs over what can only be termed an invisible bridge, one predicated on the erasure of formal colonial relations. The same can also be said of Tangier’s myriad foreign investors, an internationalization that was prefigured in the city’s 1923 designation as an international zone under tri-partite administration by the French, Spanish and British.

Despite the scale of the topic Barrada’s photographs collectively signify, a key characteristic of her images is humility. They are not epic. That said, Arab Spring, which post-dates the work in this exhibition, might very well have been in the air. For the purposes of photography, however, this means next to nothing since air is invisible, and Barrada photographs only that which, first and foremost, is to be seen for what it is.

#### Related Events

OPENING RECEPTION

**Sunday, March 18, 2012, from 4:00 to 7:00 pm**

Featuring a talk with the artist from 5:00 to 6:00pm in Kent Hall room 107.

CONCERT

**Saturday, March 31, 8:00pm**

**Damion Romero**, experimental electronics

Los Angeles based Romero is engaged in intense low-level sound manipulation. The product of homemade tone generators, his dense buzz and drone work has to be felt to be believed. This concert is co-presented with LAMPO. This concert will take place in Bond Chapel. FREE

CONCERT

**Sunday, April 1, 3:00 pm**

**Charlotte Hug**, viola

**Fred Lonberg-Holm**, cello

**Lou Mallozzi**, turntable, spoken word, assorted devices

We are extremely pleased to welcome back this trio, which could be named after the ’70s action film classic *Three the Hard Way*. Any one of them could hold down the fort solo. Together they constitute a triple threat. All have worked extensively as composer-performers in solo and ensemble settings. This to say, these are not timid souls. As an evening of improvised music, there will be sparks followed by combustion. This concert will take place in Bond Chapel. FREE

LECTURE

**Sunday, April 15, 2:00 pm**

**William Kutz**, PhD candidate, Clark University *Globalization on the Margins, Tangiers’ Socio-Spatial Fabric*

Over the past several years Kutz has conducted extensive fieldwork in Tangiers, documenting development of the city’s megaprojects, using it as a case study to understand the agents and effects of urban globalization. Kutz is a PhD candidate in geography at Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts. This event will take place in Cobb hall room 409 (down the hall from the gallery). FREE

CONVERSATION

**Monday, April 16, 6:00 pm**

**Laila Lalami**, novelist, journalist

**Ahmed El Shamsy**, Assistant Professor, University of Chicago

*Arab Spring: Unfoldings Refoldings*

Using Egypt and Morocco as grounding for a discussion about Arab Spring, these two scholars will compare notes about events in these two countries as they continue to unfold—Egypt on the eve of presidential elections and Morocco as an example of liberalized authoritarianism. El Shamsy is Assistant Professor in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at The University of Chicago. He studies the intellectual history of Islam, focusing on Islamic law and theology. Lalami is a journalist and novelist whose work

has appeared in the *Boston Globe*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Nation*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and elsewhere. She is the author of the short story collection *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* and the novel *Secret Son*. She is currently associate professor of creative writing at the University of California at Riverside. This event will take place in Swift Hall room 310. This event is co-sponsored with the University of Chicago Center for Middle Eastern Studies, and the Department of Political Science. (Swift Hall is on the main quadrangle, directly east of Cobb Hall). FREE.

LECTURE

**Sunday, April 22, 2:00 pm**

**Abdelmajid Hannoun**, Assistant Professor, University of Kansas, Lawrence *The Harraga of Tangiers*

Harragas, “those who burn” in Arabic, refers to North Africans who attempt to illegally migrate to Europe via the Straits of Gibraltar. Hannoun’s talk is based on a 2009 ethnography he conducted with young Harragas. Hannoun is Assistant Professor of Anthropology and African and African-American Studies at the University of Kansas, Lawrence. He is the author of *Violent Modernity: France in Algeria*, 2010 and is currently working on immigration and globalization in Tangiers. This event will take place in Cobb hall room 409 (down the hall from the gallery). FREE

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

**Saturday, April 28, 1:00 pm**

*Contemporary Art and Documentary Practices*

**Natasha Egan**, Curator

Director, Museum of Contemporary Photography

**David Hartt**, artist

**Judy Hoffman**, documentary filmmaker

**Leslie Wilson**, art historian

Contemporary art and documentary practices have become hopelessly, instructively, and productively intertwined over the past few decades. Based on the work of Barrada and a host of her contemporaries, we have moved on from earlier postmodernism debates about fact versus fiction to more nuanced considerations of the historical trajectory of documentary as photography became more prevalent within artistic practices after the 1960s. Using a host of examples, this panel will articulate a set of working questions for discussion and debate. This event will take place in Swift Hall room 310. FREE

FOR NEWS ABOUT ARTISTS AND EVENTS

Please sign up to receive our newsletter at [www.renaissancesociety.org](http://www.renaissancesociety.org), and follow us on Facebook and Twitter.

<sup>[</sup> this side ]

<sup>[</sup> Yto Barrada, *Route de l’Unité*, 2001/2011

<sup>[</sup> Essay by Henna Walker. Layout by the JNE Graphic Design, Chicago.

<sup>[</sup> The Renaissance Society at The University of Chicago

<sup>[</sup> 5811 South Ellis Avenue

<sup>[</sup> Chicago, Illinois 60637

<sup>[</sup> Phone: (773)702-8670

<sup>[</sup> This exhibition is realized in cooperation with Deutsche Bank. Yto Barrada is Deutsche Bank’s Artist of the Year 2011. She was selected on the recommendation of the Deutsche Bank Global Art Advisory Council. Curator: Friedhelm Hütte, Deutsche Bank Global Head of Art, co-curator: Marie Muracciole

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<sup>[</sup> In cooperation with Deutsche Bank
