



# YTO BARRADA

Ways to Baffle the Wind

MASS MoCA

# As a Wind Machine

By Andrea Andersson, Founding Director & Chief Curator  
of the Rivers Institute for Contemporary Art & Thought

**“Tropical cyclones are low-pressure systems, which originate over tropical and subtropical oceans. They are characterized by organized convection and a well-developed cyclonic circulation at the surface...As the winds strengthen and surface pressure decreases, increasing amounts of water are extracted from the warm ocean. The air rises and cools and water vapour condenses, releasing latent heat. The heating leads to a further intensification, in turn increasing surface wind and evaporation. The storm will continue to intensify until the energy input by surface evaporation is balanced by frictional dissipation. In this process, a well-developed tropical cyclone converts ocean heat energy into mechanical energy of the winds like a steam engine or Carnot engine.”**

—“Tropical Cyclones in Warmer Climate,”  
World Meteorological Organization (2007)<sup>1</sup>

**“No pat solution or formula capable of universal or nearly universal application to individual wind problems has been found.”**

—“Ways to Baffle the Wind,” *Sunset Patio Book* (1952)<sup>2</sup>

**“Wind—for the draft pistons...to be developed”**

—*The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*,  
Marcel Duchamp (trans. by George Heard Hamilton)<sup>3</sup>

I don't remember exactly when my conversations with the artist Yto Barrada turned towards the wind. After several years of drafting an exhibition together for a particular time and place, the urgencies had shifted. Museums were closed. And we were both at home, talking by telephone while children's educations continued in neighboring rooms.

If some of us were contending with the conditions of closed borders and life's perpetual deferral for the first time, Barrada was not. Between 1998 and 2004, she photographed her hometown of Tangier, Morocco, examining a place and its people in a state of waiting. The photographic series was created in the aftermath of the Schengen Agreement (which advanced free movement across Europe but foreclosed it from Africa) and the subsequent closure of the Strait of Gibraltar for Moroccans. Titled *The Strait Project*, the images form a portrait that acknowledges, as Barrada writes, the “Strait of Gibraltar as a place which inescapably stands for something larger—the crossing point of continents.”<sup>4</sup> The series is also a model of Barrada's inductive reasoning. The artist deals with parts and pieces, details which can organize into larger stories, both factual and fictional. She resists master narratives.

And so it follows that our conversations were carried between Tangier, where Barrada was raised, and New Orleans, where I was raised, not explicitly by the shared macro-histories of African diaspora, French colonization and environmental destruction or even the typology of exoticized tourist destinations celebrated for richly hued architecture, permissive culture, and operative witchcraft. No, they traveled by wind. The landscapes of Tangier and New Orleans in recent years have both been converted to Hollywood film sets, our contemporary conditions commonly used to alternately signify historical or futurist backdrops. Barrada was talking specifically about Christopher Nolan's *Inception*, the science fiction blockbuster from 2010 in which Tangier doubles as Mombasa, Kenya. And our conversation led to rudimentary and powerful



Yto Barrada, *Untitled (After Stella, Sunrise III)*, 2020. Cotton and dyes from plant extracts. 56¼ × 57 × 2¾ inches framed. Photography by Peter Clough, courtesy of Pace Gallery.

wind machines, the kinds that sit just off-screen and give the effect of significant weather events.

Barrada had been thinking of wind machines at least since her residency and exhibition at Casa Luis Barragán in Mexico City in 2019. There in architect Luis Barragán's personal library, Barrada found a copy of *Sunset Patio Book* from 1952, which includes an essay outlining various measures to evade the wind. The text, "Ways to Baffle the Wind," begins with the near-universal problem: "Without some protection against it, wind is likely to be a persistent nuisance in your patio."<sup>5</sup> But the article is not without solutions, including a proposal for a machine constructed of cotton balls and string, designed to test the direction and impact of the wind. In our first conversation about wind machines, Barrada confided that her mother "is very sensitive to drafts/draughts [courants d'air], even when sitting outdoors."<sup>6</sup> Unlike a breeze, a draft is an unwelcome current of air that her mother, like many others, believes can lead to illness. Experiences and

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- 1 Lennart Bengtsson, "Tropical Cyclones in a Warmer Climate," in the *World Meteorological Organization Bulletin*, Vol. 56, No. 3, July 2007: pp. 196–203: p. 196. Link: <https://public.wmo.int/en/bulletin/tropical-cyclones-warmer-climate>
  - 2 "Ways to Baffle the Wind," in *Sunset Patio Book: How to Plan a Garden Living Room, Ideas for Patio Building, Lanais*. 1st edition. Menlo Park, CA: Lane Publishing Co, 1952: p. 88.
  - 3 Marcel Duchamp, Richard Hamilton, and George Heard Hamilton, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even: A typographic version by Richard Hamilton of Marcel Duchamp's Green Box*, trans. George Heard Hamilton, London and Bradford: Percy Lund, Humphries and Co. Ltd, 1960: n.p.
  - 4 Yto Barrada, Mark Sealy, and Tom O'Mara, *A Life Full of Holes: The Strait Project (1998–2004)*, eds. Mark Sealy and Tom O'Mara, London: Autograph ABP, 2005.
  - 5 "Ways to Baffle the Wind," 1952, p. 88.
  - 6 This quotation comes from a conversation with the artist Yto Barrada when it seemed that time had stopped during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in the summer of 2020.



mythologies around wind drafts criss-cross cultures, and, in recent years, Barrada has begun collecting stories of drafts from friends. (A draft, of course, also refers to drafts of writing, a military draft, a weaving draft). “The wind machine,” the artist explains, “is a portrait of my mother.”<sup>7</sup>

Ever since that conversation, it has been impossible for me to stop thinking of another portrait of a woman as mechanical machine in artist Marcel Duchamp’s *The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even (La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même)*, more commonly referred to as *The Large Glass*. In his mixed media work, comprised of oil paint, lead foil, wire, and dust suspended between two panes of glass, Duchamp suspends his “Bride”:<sup>8</sup>

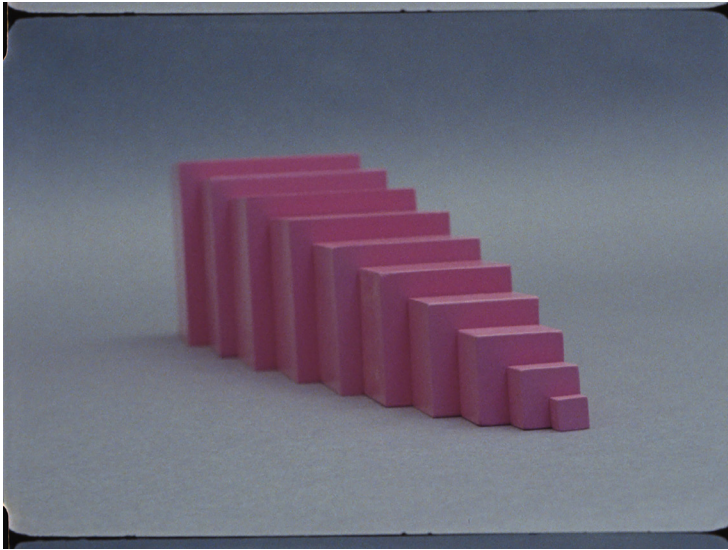
The Bride, at her base, is a reservoir of love gasoline (or timid-power). This timid-power, distributed to the motor with quite feeble cylinders, in contact with the sparks of her constant life (desire-magneto) explodes and makes this virgin blossom who has attained her desire.<sup>9</sup>

Duchamp’s description of the Bride is but one in his multiple drafts and working notes in and about *The Large Glass*. Putting aside for the moment the “stripping” of the Bride, Duchamp’s work importantly bears a relationship to Barrada’s exhibition in its demonstration of a revisionist imagination.<sup>10</sup> Between 1911 and 1960, Duchamp collected and circulated fragments, notes, and elaborations, as extensions of his major work. The “readymade,” as Duchamp describes his work comprised of found and repurposed material, may be “plann[ed] for a moment/ to come (on such a day, such a date such a minute),” but it is invariably met “with all kinds of delays.”<sup>11</sup> The readymade is never on time; it lives many lives and carries them all on its back. Of her own experience with found objects and assemblages, Barrada has explained, “In flea markets and junkyards, I can see and understand how things are built, how things are born as separate parts. I learn about chance associations, different tastes, the history of objects.”<sup>12</sup> Some of these histories, and some of these associations, may be given form or function in a new work by the artist; others may only figure in the imagination. Likewise, Duchamp conceded about *The Large Glass*, “The ideas in the glass are more important than the actual visual realizations.”<sup>13</sup>

*Ways to Baffle the Wind*, as an exhibition first conceived prior to the global pandemic, is a project full of suspense. Like the Bride in *The Large Glass* or the cotton balls dangling from a string in Barrada’s work, it has been hanging and waiting to learn from which direction the wind will blow next. During the first draft of this essay, the wind came from the Gulf of Mexico



Marcel Duchamp, *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*, 1915–1923. Oil, varnish, lead foil, lead wire, and dust on two glass panels. 109¼" × 70" × 36⅜". Philadelphia Museum of Art. Bequest of Katherine S. Dreier, 1952.



Yto Barrada, film still from *Tree Identification for Beginners*, 2017. 16mm film, color, sound, 36 minutes. Photo courtesy of the artist.

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- 7 Barrada's mother, Mounira Bouzid, figures in this exhibition as wind machine as well as in the artist's film *Tree Identification for Beginners* (2017), which chronicles Bouzid's experience as a twenty-three-year-old participant on a U.S. State Department tour of the U.S. for "young African Leaders."
- 8 Duchamp instructs on the process by which his work becomes, in photographic parlance, a "freeze frame," the suspended moment: "To raise dust/ on Dust-Glasses/ for 4 months, 6 months, which you close up afterwards." In this exhibition, Barrada suspends a work from her *After Stella* series directly on the wall, liberated from framed glass behind which they are often hung, but also from the intransigent canons, neglectful of histories of craft that figure forms and their function. Across the whole series, Barrada re-situates artist Frank Stella's paintings from 1964 to 1965, made after his visit to Morocco, in the tradition of the Casablanca Art School, about which Stella makes no mention but to which they are indebted.
- 9 In this exhibition, there is no timid power. There is soft power, exercised by the U.S. State Department in its sponsorship, planning, and management of "Operation Crossroads Africa, the title given to the program in which Barrada's mother, Mounira Bouzid, participated—and which Barrada examines in her film *Tree Identification for Beginners* (2017). There is also *The Power of Two or Three Suns* (2020), the title of Barrada's 16mm film, and the power said to be demonstrated by the xenon lamps in the industrial testing laboratories for commercial products, which the film documents.
- See Marcel Duchamp, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even: A typographic version by Richard Hamilton of Marcel Duchamp's Green Box*: n.p.
- 10 Barrada's practice, in its sensitivity to the forgotten, overwritten, and suspended, unearths the history of ethnologist Thérèse Rivière. Hired by her brother, Georges Henri Rivière, a founder of modern museology, she was appointed the Head of the Africa and Levant Department at the Institute of Ethnology in 1934, from which position she carried out fieldwork in Algeria, collecting objects from the region while under French colonial rule. Rivière collected eight hundred fifty-seven objects; her notebooks draw together personal and academic investigations, among them children's toys, textile weaving patterns, and geographical histories of land masses—an area of interest, play, and study in Barrada's practice. Across this exhibition, we can recognize traces of Rivière's approach to fieldwork, mapping, and self-education—in works like Barrada's *Land and Water Forms* (2019) as well as in *Jeu de construction Thérèse (Thérèse Unit Blocks)* (2018)—a series of white blocks arranged in geometric shapes that resemble the Kasbah, Algiers' old city. The term "unit" underscores the fragmentary nature of her practice, which was left behind and unfinished when she was institutionalized in France, beginning in 1946. She received no recognition for her research and contributions during her lifetime.
- 11 Marcel Duchamp, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even: A typographic version by Richard Hamilton of Marcel Duchamp's Green Box*: n.p.



Yto Barrada, *Jeu de construction Thérèse [Thérèse Unit Blocks]*, 2017. Painted wood. Dimensions variable.  
Photography by Tom Barratt, courtesy of Pace Gallery.

in the shape of Hurricane Ida, a wind event more powerful than Hurricane Katrina, and one which destroyed homes and power lines and deferred meetings and deadlines.<sup>14</sup> But over the past eighteen months, in the absence of site visits or in-person conversations, this project has come to take waiting into account or even as its *raison d'être*; it has itself become a series of drafts, associations, potentialities—at times, impossibilities. It has assumed a rhythm that resists modern time and its commitments to labor and productivity. This exhibition makes use as much as it makes fun of the machine. Recently, Barrada told me about her research on a new machine—a void-fill machine which is apparently readily available on the Internet. Some of these machines provide new uses for air, which need not gust, be blown, or pushed, but can merely take up space. With sensitivity to the sometimes low bar for art objects, this exhibition asks for both more and less. It puts objects to work in the services of our understanding of the phenomena around us.

With a similar aim, Duchamp debuted his newest mechanical art, his *Rotoreliefs*, at the 1935 Concours Lépine, a fair for inventors.

His “play toys,”<sup>15</sup> as he called them, were double-sided discs intended to be spun on a turntable at 40–60 rpm to expand the viewer’s sense of perception and illusion. Duchamp’s optical and kinetic machines were intimately connected to his discoveries in film—and his first cinematic collaborations with the artist Man Ray, *Anémic Cinéma* (1926). They figure in a history that includes the *Dreamachine*, created by artist Brion Gysin, writer William S. Burroughs and technician Ian Sommerville in 1961. Like the *Rotoreliefs*, the *Dreamachine* rotates on a record turntable. A light bulb suspends in the center of the rotating cylinder and emanates light through the cylinder’s cut-out holes, resulting in a luminous pulsation of approximately 8–13 flickers per second which mimics the electrical pulsations of the brain at rest. Intended to be looked at with closed eyes, the *Dreamachine* produces mandala-like visual patterns, which pair with the pulsation of light to yield an altered state of consciousness. Yto Barrada’s film, *The Power of Two or Three Suns*, is a portrait of another rotational machine with a core of light. Like the *Rotoreliefs* and the *Dreamachine*, the instrument accelerates, emitting light and whirring sounds, which build

with both the tension and possibility of cinema and technology. It figures in a history of film and invention, in the arrangement of the found and ordinary to produce spectacular (if sometimes non-retinal) and mind-altering objects and experiences. In the film, a hand in the laboratory can be seen methodically affixing color panels to a metal framework. The panels are, in fact, fabric swatches—striped, checkered, some with flower motifs. These swatches will soon be subjected to the radiant power of the central xenon lamp and rotated at great speeds in a laboratory designed to simulate exposure to the intense conditions of the natural world—forces like UV radiation, heat, cold, and, of course, wind. These solar simulation chambers are said to emit the “power of two or three suns.”

At the center of *Yto Barrada: Ways to Baffle the Wind* is terrific power—of light, of cinema, of play, of wind, and of the relentless human desire to control the natural world around us. Sometimes power is generated by machine, often by fiction. It can be hard to see, but easily felt. It moves things.

- 12 Yto Barrada, “Tangerine Dreams and Magic in the City: A Conversation between Negar Azimi and Yto Barrada,” *Riffs*, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2011: p. 125.
- 13 George Heard Hamilton, “Inside The Green Box,” *The Bride Stripped Bared by Her Bachelors, Even: A typographic version by Richard Hamilton of Marcel Duchamp’s Green Box*: n.p.
- 14 This exhibition acknowledges the human hand in the study of our natural environment, as a factor in its changing, and as a demonstration of human hubris in our futile attempts to control it. *Tangier Island Wall* (2019) takes its name from another Tangier, a small island in the Chesapeake Bay off the coast of Virginia which, in the face of climate change and rising sea levels, sinks slowly into the ocean. Many inhabitants of this island of crab fishermen hope for a sea wall to be constructed to protect and insulate them from the inevitable floods of the twenty-first century. Due to the ebb and flow of the tides, crab traps often collect on the docks of the island and serve as material and inspiration for Barrada’s anti-monument to porous barriers.
- 15 The distinction—formal and operative—between toys and art object persists across Barrada’s exhibition, in which blocks and models, designed for children’s discovery, assume new *and* old functions.



Yto Barrada, film still from *The Power of Two or Three Suns*, 2020. 16mm film, color, sound, 36 minutes. Photo courtesy of the artist.

**Yto Barrada** (b. 1971, Paris) is a Moroccan-French artist recognized for her multidisciplinary investigations of cultural phenomena and historical narratives. Engaging with the performativity of archival practices and public interventions, Barrada's installations reinterpret social relationships, uncover subaltern histories, and reveal the prevalence of fiction in institutionalized narratives.

In 2006, Barrada founded the Cinémathèque de Tanger, the first art house theater to celebrate local and international cinema in Tangier.

Her work has been exhibited at Tate Modern, MoMA, The Met, the Renaissance Society, the Walker Art Center, Whitechapel Gallery, and the 2007 and 2011 Venice Biennales. Barrada has received multiple awards, including the Roy R. Neuberger Prize (2019); the Tiger Award for Best Short Film at the International Film Festival Rotterdam (2016); the Abraaj Group Art Prize, UAE (2015); Robert Gardner Fellowship in Photography (2013); and Deutsche Guggenheim Artist of the Year (2011).

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## **Yto Barrada: Ways to Baffle the Wind**

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**MASS MoCA**

1040 MASS MoCA Way  
North Adams, MA 01247  
413.MoCA.111  
[massmoca.org](http://massmoca.org)