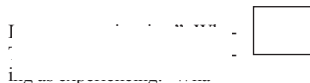


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Jaargang 18 No. 91



Robert Barry

By
Kathan Brown

“The thing I remember about Robert Barry,” a friend said to me when I mentioned I was writing this essay, “Is going into what seemed to be an empty gallery – I think it was 1970 – and seeing people walking around looking up over their heads. I couldn’t see what they were looking at until I found a wall label that explained that the room contained a frequency band of radio waves running a few feet from the ceiling. Well, after that I looked up, too. Of course, radio waves are always there, everywhere, but the surprise of having someone call your attention to them like that – well, it was visual, although you couldn’t really see anything.”

Robert Barry invented invisible visual art. He did a number of works with radio waves. He worked with radioactive material, and with inert gasses. He speaks about the gasses this way:

The thing about the inert gas was that inert is an important word. It doesn’t mix with anything else; one could say that a particular body of gas, although expanding and changing, is essentially the same. It’s not going to change into something else. It’s really permanent – there was also the idea that the gas comes from the atmosphere and what I did was simply to return it, complete the cycle of returning it to the atmosphere.

That is a concept, a concept that the work produced in the mind of the artist – and perhaps in the minds of “viewers.” My notion that conceptual art consists of (1) idea, (2) work, and then concept is really put to the test here. If you read this description carefully, however, you will see that the idea Barry started with was a word, “inert” – or perhaps two words “inert gas”. He wanted to use these words as material to make art. Barry points out in the interview with Rob-

in White from which the previous quote is taken that we can’t be certain whether or not he actually *did* anything with gasses. The work was about “defining as experiencing.” What we are sure he did do was have printed an announcement that said:

ROBERT BARRY, New York
 Inert gas series, 1969; Helium (2 cubic feet)
 Description: Sometime during the morning of March 5, 1969, 2 cubic feet of Helium will be released into the atmosphere.

A person reading the announcement might envision the activity, and taking time to do that, might continue on in his mind to realize the concept – perhaps the one I quoted from the artist, perhaps a part of it, perhaps a different one. It doesn’t matter what concept he grasped, so long as something occurred to him. “It’s about people adding, not adding what, I don’t care what they add”, Barry says.

Barry learned about using material in art school; he was a painter and (minimal) sculptor before he began to work with language. He studied under Robert Motherwell at Hunter College, but rejected abstract expressionism as it was being taught in all art schools at that time (1961-3). One thing he learned from abstract expressionists, however, and still believes firmly, is that “making art is really about doing. It’s not really about making things. And the thing must always just be what happens while you’re doing something interesting.” What he was doing that was interesting, after about 1968 when he gave up painting and sculpture in favor of using language sculpturally, was *thinking*. He was thinking about “the absurdity of trying to understand or grasp anything which doesn’t seem obvious.” Infinity for instance: “gas endlessly expanding in the atmosphere, or radio waves... even when you turn the thing off it just continues endlessly going out into space.” Perhaps it is absurd to try to grasp

(advertisement)

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Exhibition
 5/4 – 17/5

Opening
 5/4 18 – 20h

**ROBERT
 BARRY**

ONLY

In collaboration with
 Galerie Greta Meert

Jan Mot
 Rue Antoine Dansaertstraat 190
 1000 Brussels, Belgium

it. But, being an artist, he did try, and that resulted in the works I have just described. It is important to realize that, while he was thinking, he did not figure it out and then write it down so others could see what he saw. What he did was use the material of language in order to think about it.

An absurdly elusive subject that preoccupied Barry for several years in the early 1970’s was art. Here is one of his works from that time (1972):

It should remain the way it is could be in trouble has possibilities could become familiar will lead to something else may be a success isn’t necessary

implies things
could be misunderstood
is public
will please some
has been tampered with
fits in
isn't presented everywhere
is among other things
can be objected to
could be elsewhere
is part of something larger
might be featured
is dependent
effects other things
is individual
will be repeated
is limited
can be accounted for
will cause problems
was anticipated
may fail
should be left alone
isn't possessed
was organized
could be destroyed
will have enemies
might be helpful
is surrounded
might be distracting
adds something
is active
can get in the way
may need protection

Nowhere was it said, so far as I know, that he was describing art in these works – but what else? I remember a show of lists like this that I saw in Rome in 1972. It was curious to me then, and still is, why this work was not totally baffling to the Italians (it was baffling to me at the time, and I'm a native-speaker of English).

A couple of years later (1974) I saw another exhibition of Robert Barry's, this time at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. The room was dark, and a slide projector on automatic projected a series of color landscapes alternating with large, single words. It was beautiful and oddly moving, but again, I was baffled – I didn't know enough not to try to figure it out. I needed more confidence in my own insights in order not to try to see what I was "supposed" to see. What I have learned since then is that truth is not revealed to the viewer by the artist; the viewer finds it himself, out of his own experience, finds it along with the artist by following the artist's train of thought and at the same time making his own associations and connections. The words that Barry uses are suggestive and significant, and their context is always open-ended, so that a person encountering the work can learn from

his own thoughts. The function of art and the artist is to make us aware, to cause us to expand our comprehension of life. "Are you trying to convey some kind of information to people?" Robin White asked Barry.

"Yes," he replied. "But I'm not trying to teach them anything". When I read that reply, something came into my mind that Eric Hoffer said: "In a time of drastic change, it is the learners who will inherit the earth. The learned will find themselves well-equipped for the world of the past." We can learn from Barry's work without his teaching us so long as we don't think of ourselves as learned, so long as we are open to suggestion.

By the time Barry came to make etchings at Crown Point Press (January of 1978), he was using words as discrete forms on or around the edges of a sheet of paper, “activating” the page.

You begin to activate that space around the word, the meanings as you go from one word to another... The words choose themselves once I get started in it... I have these lists of words that I've compiled – I start that way... Sometimes a word may just look dried up, and I'll remove it and add something else. The list has between a hundred and two hundred words, words which somehow mean something to me now. When I begin to work I look at the list and something will just jump out, and I'll start with that and see where that goes. Then add something to it and see what happens. Then I'll think, these are kind of downers – I'm going to come up with something that will brighten it a little bit. Or there may be too many four syllable words – we'll do a one syllable – that kind of thing... I don't believe that there is only one right, absolute, correct word. But there could be wrong words – sometimes you'll do something, and it just doesn't look right. So you reject it. Somehow it just didn't work that time.

This quotation shows how traditional Barry's approach is, though his material is non-traditional, and his considerations in his choosing and arranging are not entirely visual. Barry continues in this way:

You asked me why are the words arranged that way, and I tried to explain that they have to be that way so that they can be allowed to be what they are. If you run it all together, nothing is going to take place. There isn't going to be any room to move, to interpret, to grow. That's why I like a lot of space between things. Space becomes very dynamic – it's that in which we can func-

tion, you know, we can move, interpret, we can find out.

And finally, he goes on to describe his attitude towards using the etching process. He speaks clearly; I cannot improve on his words:

I like the idea of cutting into the metal. It's much slower (than drawing) for one thing... It becomes very much involved with the actual making of the word, especially when you have to do it backwards, you know. It's really hard and you think very much about making each one – they don't flow. You have to be disciplined, have an incredible amount of concentration...I hadn't really thought about this at all before, except sometimes in the sound pieces, where you really – after awhile you just think about the air coming up out of your throat, coming out of your mouth, your tongue, the dampness on your lips or something like that. In the sound pieces, there also has to be a lot of concentration, especially after a long period of time. After recording for 45 minutes or an hour (and you still have a long way to go), not missing a word on your list becomes a real challenge.

This is Barry's "performance" – before a tape machine, setting up slides, or, earlier, letting (or not letting) gas out of canisters. Still viewers are affected by it as an action rather than as a tangible object. Here is a description of a performance of Barry's which I attended recently (1978). It was held at MOCA, the Museum of Conceptual Art, in San Francisco. There is a large gallery area upstairs and an old and comfortable bar downstairs. Announcements had been sent out, and the bar was crowded. Barry was present, sitting in the bar drinking and talking with people. The work was on a tape and was broadcast upstairs and downstairs simultaneously for about two hours. It consisted of Barry's voice, roundly pronouncing words, with long spaces of silence in between each one. Upstairs – with a handful of people (at any one time) all silently listening, footsteps or a banging door being the only interrupting sounds – the work was meditative. Because of the long spaces between the words, one was forever drifting away, then being called back by the next word. Downstairs, however, the bar was noisy, the lights bright, the beer plentiful. As we pursued our conversations, our jokes, our stories, Barry's words would interrupt us. "Incredible" would come rolling in on us from the loudspeaker, "Soon": "Soon", muttered an old "regular" at the bar. "Soon, sooner" someone laughed. The words worked their way into

conversations, affecting us without our realizing it. It was a full evening.

It has been seven years since I first encountered Barry's work in Rome. It seems so simple, now, so elegant and so compelling that I can hardly believe that I thought then that I couldn't understand it. It has been more than a decade that Barry has been working with language, and his works have

Why mind that Eric Hoffer said: "Is a time of

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Gallery moves to new space in Brussels



- View over Brussels from Place Poelaert, next to the gallery's new space. (Photo: Julia Wielgus)

The show *Only* by Robert Barry is the last one to be held at the rue Dansaert 190. After almost 12 years, the gallery will move to a new location in the rue de la Régence 67, next to the Palais de Justice. We will occupy

the ground floor of a 19th century house, known for the law bookstore Bruylant situated here until 2011. On the upper floors of the building the galleries of Micheline Szwajcer and Catherine Bastide will open

their new spaces. Our first show - with communal opening on June 11 - will be by David Lamelas.

MoMA acquires group of works by David Lamelas



• David Lamelas, *Analysis of the Elements by which the Massive Consumption of Information Takes Place*, photograph taken during the installation in Düsseldorf in 1968.

BRUSSELS, 14 MARCH - The Museum of Modern Art in New York recently acquired a group of works by David Lamelas. *Analysis of the Elements by which the Massive Consumption of Information Takes Place* dates from 1968 and was first shown by Wide White Space at Prospect 68 in Düsseldorf Kunstthalle, conceived by Konrad Fischer as an 'international preview of art in avant-garde galleries'. This early multimedia installation is constructed around the three major channels for transmitting information: auditory (excerpts of London radio stations), visual (an arbitrarily selected publicity film) and printed media (copies of German newspapers and magazines). This work is a development of an earlier installation which also entered the museum's collection: *Office of Information about the Vietnam War at three Levels: the Visual, Text*

and *Audio*, Lamelas' contribution to the Venice Biennale of 1968. Other works acquired by MoMA are *A Study of the Relationships between Inner and Outer Space* (1969), *Time as Activity* Düsseldorf (1969) and *Film 18 Paris IV: 70* (1970). The museum described Lamelas as "a key figure of the Conceptual art avant-garde since the 1960s. His early structuralist films and media installations of the 1960s and 1970s are particularly important in their innovative treatment of time and space, and his work has been highly influential upon a later generation of artists". The acquisition was initiated by Sabine Breitwieser, former Chief Curator of the Department of Media and Performance Art and made possible thanks to the generosity of Robert Speyer, the Latin American and Caribbean Fund, Jill Kraus, Beatriz and Andres von Buch,

Estrellita Brodsky, Adriana Cisneros de Griffin, Mauro Herlitzka, Marie-Josée Kravis, Raul Naón, Carlos Padula, Gonzalo Parodi, and Ernesto Poma. *Office of Information* was donated to the museum by the artist. (JM)

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Splendide Hotel in Madrid

MADRID, 13 MARCH - The projects of Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster invite the visitor on a journey through spaces and times where literature becomes a habitual practice of inhabiting the world. The artwork is redefined as a process beyond the concrete significance of objects. Literature and theatre constitute strategies for the configuration of an imaginary where physical space is no more than the tip of an iceberg traced out by the viewer on both real and fictional coordinates. From her first works of the mid-eighties to her latest creations, the artist has explored the notion of space as a revealing medium, and of time as one of its closest allies. The characteristics of the Palacio de Cristal offer Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster the opportunity for a new exercise that will attempt to revisit the 19th century context in which it was built. 1887 is the year when Ricardo Velázquez Bosco constructed the greenhouse known today as the Palacio de Cristal, or 'Crystal

Palace'. Its purpose was to house an exhibition of plants and flowers from the Philippines as part of the General Exposition of the Philippine Islands, held that year. In the same year, Rimbaud was in Aden, Yemen, after the publication the previous year of his *Illuminations*. In the first poem of this compilation, *Après le Déluge*, he gives life to the Splendide Hôtel: "... Et le Splendide Hôtel fut bâti dans le chaos de glaces et de nuit du pôle" ("... And the Splendide Hôtel was built in the chaos of ice and night of the Pole"). Also inaugurated in 1887 was the Hotel Splendide in Lugano, and the Splendide was furthermore the name of the hotel in Évian-les-Bains where Proust used to summer with his parents. Splendide Hotel is now also this hotel into which Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster has temporarily transformed the Palacio de Cristal in Retiro Park. A large luminous sign on the main door announces that the visitor is entering the new Splendide in Retiro Park, a hotel with

just one impenetrable room that replicates the original architecture of the building. The carpet covering the floor and the mystery reigning inside evoke that distant period when the Palacio was built. Around it are several rocking-chairs surrounded by books, inviting visitors to sit down and transport themselves to the worlds hidden inside the literary selection that the French artist has made for this occasion. Authors like the Philippine José Rizal, Dostoyevsky, Rubén Darío, H.G. Wells and Vila-Matas become companions on the voyage in time that Gonzalez-Foerster encourages us to share.

On the occasion of the show onestart press published an artist book entitled *1887 – Splendide Hotel* in a limited and numbered edition of 250 copies. (EUR 35).

The installation by Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster at the Palacio de Cristal is on view until the 31st of August 2014.



• Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, *Splendide Hotel*, Palacio de Cristal, Madrid (photo: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, 2014)

The Changing Art of Portraiture, Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University, New Brunswick (US), 25/01 - 13/07; *Post Picasso. Contemporary Artists' Responses to His Art*, Museu Picasso Barcelona (ES), 06/03 - 29/06; *Rineke Djikstra: The Krazyhouse*, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington DC, 29/03 - 15/06 (solo); *Conversation Piece IV*, Frans Halsmuseum, Haarlem (NL), 28/05 - 21/09 (solo); *Go Between*s, Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, 31/05 - 31/08; *Manifesta 10*, Saint Petersburg (RU), 28/06 - 31/10

Mario Garcia Torres

Galería Elba Benítez, Madrid, 21/02 - 05/04 (solo); *The Invisible Hand. Curating as Gesture*, 2nd CAFAM Biennale, Beijing, 28/02 - 20/04; *Words As Doors*, Künstlerhaus, Halle für Kunst & Medien, KM-, Graz (AU), 15/03 - 22/05; *Three Collectors*, etc 78, Brussels, 13/04 - 17/05; *8th Berlin Biennale*, KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, 29/05 - 03/08; *Black House. Notes on Architecture*, Museum of Contemporary Art of Estonia, Tallinn, 21/06 - 27/07

Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster

SPLENDIDE HOTEL, Palacio de Cristal, Madrid, 14/03 - 31/08 (solo); *The Librarian on Fire* 1(c). *Haunting Glyphs*, Protoncinema, Istanbul (TR), 29/03 - 12/04; 303 gallery, New York City (US), 17/04 - 31/05 (solo); *La Décennie*, Centre Pompidou-Metz (FR), 24/05 - 02/03; *Manifesta 10*, Saint Petersburg (RU), 28/06 - 31/10

Douglas Gordon

The Crime Was Almost Perfect, Witte de With, Rotterdam (NL), 24/01 - 27/04; *Football: The Beautiful Game*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles (US), 02/02 - 20/07; *Douglas Gordon: Pretty much every film and video work from about 1992 until now*, Musée d'Art Moderne, Paris, 07/03 - 31/12 (solo); *19th Biennale of Sydney*, Sydney (AU), 21/03 - 09/06; *Douglas Gordon, Cathiness Horizons*, Thurso (UK), 10/05 - 11/10 (solo); *Douglas Gordon*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne (AU), 30/05 - 10/07 (solo); *Pretty much every film and video work from about 1992 until now*, GOMA, Glasgow (UK), 27/06 - 28/09 (solo); *GENERATION: 25 Years of Contemporary Art in Scotland*, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh (UK), 28/06 - 25/01

Joachim Koester

The Crime Was Almost Perfect, Witte de With, Rotterdam (NL), 24/01 - 27/04; *The Invisible Hand. Curating as Gesture*, 2nd CAFAM Biennale, Beijing, 28/02 - 20/04; *Habitar el tiempo*, Museo Jumex, Mexico City, 07/03 - 18/05; *The Ghost Shop*, Camera Aus-

tria, Graz (AT), 14/03 - 25/05 (solo); *L'image suivante...*, Musée des Arts Contemporains de la Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles, Hornu (BE), 23/03 - 08/06; *The Place of Dead Roads*, Centre d'art contemporain, Geneva (CH), 23/05 - 17/08 (solo); *Kill All Monsters*, Ausstellungsraum Klingental, Basel (CH), 25/05 - 29/06; *Phantoms in the Dirt*, Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago (US), 25/07 - 05/10

David Lamelas

Extension of the Combat Zone. The Collection. 1968 - 2000, Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin, 08/11 - 31/12; *Other Primary Structures*, The Jewish Museum, New York City (US), 14/03 - 03/08; *Words As Doors*, Künstlerhaus, Halle für Kunst & Medien, KM, Graz (AU), 15/03 - 22/05; Lia Rumma, Milano (IT), 25/03 - 26/04 (solo); *Uncommon Ground. Land Art in Britain 1966 - 1979*, Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Wakefield (UK), 05/04 - 15/06; FRAC Lorraine, Metz (FR), 06/06 - 30/08 (solo); Jan Mot, Brussels, 11/06 - 19/07 (solo)

Sharon Lockhart

In Context. The Portrait in Contemporary Conceptual Photography, Wellin Museum of Art, Hamilton College, Clinton (US), 30/01 - 27/07; *Milena/Milena*, Bonniers Konsthall, Stockholm, 16/04 - 29/06 (solo); *Liverpool Biennial 2014*, Liverpool (GB), 05/07 - 26/10; *Artes Mundi 6 Biennial Exhibition 2014*, Cardiff (GB), 23/10 - 22/02

Tino Sehgal

These Associations, CCB, Rio de Janeiro (BR), 11/03 - 21/04 (solo); Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo, São Paulo (BR), 22/03 - 04/05

Philippe Thomas

Hommage à Philippe Thomas et autres œuvres augmenté de L'Ombre du jaseur (d'après Feux pâles), Mamco, Geneva (CH), 12/02 - 18/05 (solo); *Philippe Thomas: AB (1978-1980)*, mfc-michèle didier, Paris, 29/04 - 31/05 (solo)

Tris Vonna-Michell

Lecture-Performance: New Artistic Formats, Places, Practices and Behaviours, MUSAC, León (ES), 18/10 - 06/07; VOX, Montréal (CA), 06/02 - 12/04 (solo); Gallery TPW, Toronto (CA), 10/05 - 07/06 (solo)

Ian Wilson

There Will Never Be Silence: Scoring John Cage's 4'33, Museum of Modern Art, New York City (US), 12/10 - 22/06; *Flatland. A Plateau of Sculptures*, Mamco, Geneva (CH), 12/02 - 18/05; 3rd Biennale of Bahia (BR), 29/05 - 07/09; *Yokohama Triennale*

2014, Yokohama Museum of Art / Shinko
Pier, Yokohama (JP), 01/08 - 03/11

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ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

(advertisement)

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