

Une situation Robert Barry

A retrospective exhibition divided into eight timed sections

**An exhibition by Mathieu Copeland and Circuit
from 24 September to 19 November 2022
Tuesday to Saturday, from 14:00 to 18:00,
and by appointment**

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A retrospective exhibition in two spaces and eight times of American artist Robert Barry whose work revolves around language and questions the materiality of art.

The exhibition presents an overview of Robert Barry's art, from 1964 to the present day. A student of Robert Motherwell and Tony Smith, amongst others, at Hunter College in NYC, Barry (born in 1936 in the Bronx, New York) began his artistic career with the exhibition *8 Young Artists* organized by Eugene Goosen at the Hudson River Museum, 11 October – 25 October 1964, an exhibition today considered as one of the first of minimal art. CIRCUIT's exhibition begins chronologically with the invitation card to Barry's first solo exhibition at the Westerly Gallery that same month of 64 thanks to the recommendation of Tony Smith. The mailer was designed and hand-printed by the artist and featured a drawing taking the motif of a featured painting.

Barry embarks over the following years on a gradual process of minimal reduction, moving from painting spots to grids, then lines to reduce his pattern to a raw cotton duck canvas with only the edges painted. He then proceeds to realising a series of monochrome paintings that define the space, for instance four small canvases each placed near to the four corners of the wall, and small painted units (squares, circles, ...) with widely spaced placement on the wall area. Barry subsequently moves on to sculpture, realising pieces including four white plaster cubes placed in a square format. In late 1967, following this process of formal and material reduction, Barry goes on to create wire sculptures (hanging and pendulum pieces) then wire and cord installations—first using coloured thread, then transparent nylon. These monofilament pieces literally put the space under tension. A formal minimalism that gradually contracts to reveal the space in-between, ultimately showing nothing but the empty space, and time.

This principle of reduction finally crystallizes in the use of words. First, as sentences that describe an apparently absent work (*Carrier Wave Piece*, aka the Radio Pieces, and the *Inert Gas Series*, respectively realised in January and March 1969). Robert Barry then moves on to the use of statements, using the gallery itself as a medium, and its invitation cards as the locations for his art (*Closed Gallery Piece*, 1969-70, *Marcuse Piece* 1970-71, *Invitation Piece* 1972-73.) Gradually, the words are set free. The artist defines the absent work of art in giving its qualities through language itself (*The Defining Of It...*, 1969-). A consideration that leads him to free himself from the sentence and to present words as autonomous objects (*Word List Pieces*, 1971-), and ultimately, fragmented words. These pieces can be viewed through a recreation of the artist's first exhibition at Leo Castelli

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Gallery in 1971 that solely consisted of a table and four chairs where Robert Barry presented the entire documentation of his textual works to date in a series of binders. In CIRCUIT's first room, this formal evolution is rendered visible chronologically through a timeline of paintings, drawings, and documents from private collections loans and from the artist's archives presented to the public for the first time. These art works and documentations also announce and complement the works presented in the second space.

CIRCUIT's second space is divided into eight timed sections. Each week, we are invited to experience a different work. First, a work from the series of "monofilament" pieces from 1968. Arranged in the exact centre of the volume of the second space, three transparent nylon threads hold a gold ring. During the second week, FM, AM radio waves and ultrasounds pieces from 1968-69 – signals without content – are broadcast in the empty space. For the third week, we experience a radiation piece originally presented by Harald Szeemann for *When Attitudes Become Forms* at the Kunsthalle Bern in March 1969. The space is left entirely empty for the fourth week, creating a situation where we are "free to think about what we are going to do", an essential sentence written by philosopher Herbert Marcuse. In partnership with the LUFF, the fifth week presents a retrospective of sound pieces alternating words and silences (*sound words*, 1976-) that the artist produced from the mid-1970s onwards. The sixth week plunges the space into darkness to allow us to experience other possible materiality for the definition of it and words as autonomous being through a selection of the artists' slide works (*Slide Pieces*, 1971-). During the seventh week, for the exhibition from 4 November through 10 November 2022 the art centre will be closed. A series of closed gallery pieces began in 1969 where the gallery itself becomes the medium of the artwork. Finally, for the eighth and final week of the exhibition, we are invited to experience a new work written by the artist. For *Each Walls Are Painted A Bright Colour*, an area in the centre of each wall is loosely brushed with a different colour.

In parallel to these two main spaces, two large ensembles are also presented: a retrospective of selected video works produced by the artist between 2004 and 2015, and a retrospective of wall pieces in four works. Robert Barry continues his study of words, and following the process of 'rematerialization' of art the artist began at the end of the 60s, he frees himself from the classic support of paper or canvas to consider the word directly written on the wall. The artist's first 'wall drawing' consists of words constructing on the surface of the wall a square, a piece calling to mind the shape of a possible absent painting, realised for his personal exhibition at Leo Castelli in 1978. On the opposite wall, the work *YOUTO* explodes the word to the size of the wall, the height of which giving the O its diameter. A clear break from the use of existing fonts, this was a piece originally realised for his solo exhibition at the Renaissance Society in Chicago in 1985. Following a process of sparse arrangement, the word floats on the surface, with some cut and fragmented on the wall's edges. The two commissions created by the artist especially for CIRCUIT are realised on the exterior window and the central wall. On the main window, words written in semi-transparent coloured vinyl project their reflections inside the architecture of the art centre. On the facing wall, *Silver Words on White Wall* are made of laser-cut stainless steel letters that reflect its surroundings.

In Lawrence Weiner's essential words, "Robert Barry made a situation into a reality." The eight acts constituting the retrospective are as many invitations to experience eight "situations". Teaching us how to read art, these works of words and their architectural interventions are reinterpreted in parallel to a recreation of the artist's iconic actions. Situations re-enacting historical, definitive, and radical

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moments of “this activity that we call Art,” to use the expression so dear to the artist. Among these we could mention the physic series and the pieces transmitted telepathically (1969-), and the inert gases released into the atmosphere, a work originally realised in California in March 1969. This historic piece was recreated in advance of the retrospective on 14 May 2022 on the shores of Lake Geneva, where 30 liters of argon were returned to the atmosphere. A poster documenting the action of is displayed throughout Lausanne’s public spaces (Éditions Circuit, 2022).

This retrospective exhibition – that will travel to the Foundation Venet in Le Muy and the Collection Lambert in Avignon in the spring of 2023 – announces the first monograph dedicated to the entire body of work of the artist, edited by the curator of the exhibition Mathieu Copeland, and published in 2023 by Verlag Walther und Franz Koenig.

Born in 1936 in New York, Robert Barry lives in New Jersey. Considered one of the precursors of American conceptual art, he holds a Bachelor’s and a Master’s degree in art from Hunter College, New York. He participated in the exhibitions *When Attitudes Become Form* at the Kunsthalle Bern and the Institute of Contemporary Art, London (1969), Documenta V and VII in Kassel (1972 and 1977). Since 1970, his work has been shown in numerous solo exhibitions, including the Tate Gallery, London (1972), the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (1974), the Van Abbe Museum, Eindhoven (1977), the Museum of Conceptual Art, San Francisco (1978), The Renaissance Society, Chicago (1985), and the Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich (2001). In 2003-2004, a retrospective of his works from 1963 to 1975, accompanied by a catalogue, was presented at the Kunsthalle Nuremberg in Germany and at the Aargauer Kunsthhaus in Switzerland.

Mathieu Copeland has developed a curatorial practice that seeks to subvert the traditional role of exhibitions and to renew their perception. Copeland co-organised *VOIDS. A Retrospective* (Centre Pompidou, 2009) and has curated, among others, *Une exposition mise en scene* (Théâtre National de la Ferme du Buisson, 2021), *Une rétrospective d'expositions fermées* (Fri-Art, 2016), *Exhibition of a Film* (an exhibition as a feature film for cinemas, 2015), the Phill Niblock retrospective (CIRCUIT and Musée de l'Élysée, 2011), and *Soundtrack for an Exhibition* (Musée d'art contemporain de Lyon, 2006). Copeland has edited over twenty-five books, including “Philippe Decrauzat – Delay” (Verlag Koenig, 2022), “Gustav Metzger: Writings (1953-2016)” (JRP-Editions, 2019), “The Anti-Museum” (Koenig Books, 2017), and “Choreographing Exhibitions” (Les Presses du Reel, 2013).

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