

# 205

HUDSON GALLERY

205 Hudson Street New York, NY 10013

## Robert Barry: All the things I know ... 1962 to present by Alexandra Nicolaides

April 2015

An early explorer and originator of Conceptual art, Robert Barry has been making artwork that probes absence, or what we perceive to be absence. The exhibition's title speaks directly to this notion. It comes from a penciled wall piece, "All the things I know but of which I am not at the moment thinking—1:36p.m.; June 15, 1969" (1969). As sentences go, it is befuddling. Barry's known things, whatever those are, have been negated by Barry. What is left? The meaning is unclear—too much is held back. Meaning and ambiguity are in constant struggle in Barry's work. Negotiating that relationship is at the heart of the exhibition.

"All the things I know..." is the first solo exhibition of Barry's work in America in thirty years. Hunter College, where Barry received his BFA (1957), MA (1963), and was a teacher (1964 - 79), is a fitting venue for his homecoming. In 1962 Barry was a painter, but even in his early paintings there are seeds of Barry's Conceptual practice. Diptych (1962 - 2014) pairs an early, untitled painting from 1962—a mustard-colored, abstract canvas—with *Incomplete* (2014), a wood panel with the title painted on it. The unassuming and empty inches of white wall between the artworks are all the years between 1962 and 2014. The exterior space between the paintings, as opposed to the interior space within the paintings, is activated. At a 2008 exhibition at Yvon Lambert, Barry exhibited an iteration of this diptych with a different painting, dated 1962 - 2008. The diptych is perpetually incomplete (as titled). By pairing the constant 1962 abstract with the inconstant second painting, an early work becomes contemporary. Its future, not a static fixture on a white wall, is unpredictable.

ALL THE THINGS I KNOW  
BUT OF WHICH I AM NOT  
AT THE MOMENT THINKING—  
1:36PM: JUNE 15, 1969

"All the things I know but of which I am not at the moment thinking—1:36 p.m. June 15, 1969" (1969). Pencil on wall, Dimensions variable, Exhibition copy. Image courtesy of Ringler Collection, Zurich. Photo credit: Bill Orcutt

On first entering the exhibition, the words of the performer were inaudible, just a singsong sound. Snippets of words are heard while progressing through the space: her voice faltered as she read the word "Conflict." Titled "Untitled Performance" (1972-present), the performer sits at a desk with four sheets of words in two columns in front of her. The list of words is visible, but inaccessible. The performer's voice, at 30-second intervals, is a constant anticipation. It is potently absurd and seemingly arbitrary. Barry's artworks encourage freedom of thought.

Anything is possible; every meaning is possible; the viewer, the gallery, the artwork are engaged and on alert. But this also means the counter must be true: nothing is understandable; meaning veers into the unknowable.

The exhibition continues in a more intimate gallery upstairs. Barry released five inert gases around Los Angeles in 1969, documenting the action with photographs, writing, and a poster for an exhibition, all of which are on display. A red air tank in a non-descript desert landscape are all that is seen in the photograph of “Inert Gas Series: Helium. Sometime during the Morning of March 5, 1969, 2 cubic feet of Helium will be released into the atmosphere” (1969). The helium is present but invisible no matter how closely the photograph is viewed. The gallery poster, titled “Inert Gas Series/Helium, Neon, Argon, Krypton, Xenon/From a Measured Volume to Indefinite Expansion” (1969), has the exhibition title, a phone number that went to a recording of said title, and a P.O. Box typed along the bottom of a large, empty white poster. Within this grouping of work, there is an oscillating dialectic continually putting the viewer in an uncertain position. The photographs reveal and deny a performance, as the poster informs and rejects the exhibition. An unseen labyrinth—a maze of experience and communication—is constructed. The way something should work—be it an artwork, an exhibition, or the artist-viewer relationship—is undercut with welcomed humor

Lucy Lippard wrote a review of Barry’s work that was used by Barry in “Robert Barry Presents Three Shows And A Review by Lucy R. Lippard” (1971). It is an important piece of writing to his practice. In the catalogue for “All the things I know...” an excerpt from Lippard’s review is highlighted and in an interview with Barry, he draws particular attention to some of Lippard’s questions: “Does the artist have a place in the world, and, if so, is it changing? Is he/she simply a questioner or is he/she the imposer of conditions upon the aesthetic capacity of everyone else, without which the world would be quite a different place?” There is idealism in Barry’s practice and Lippard’s ideas about the potential of his art to transform. The belief in the impact of art to catalyze an individual and society is important to much contemporary art work, particularly social practice. As an exploration of communication, the exhibition feels open and direct, even with, or perhaps because of the presence of absence.

<http://www.brooklynrail.org/2015/03/artseen/robert-barry-all-the-things-i-know-1962-to-present>



Installation view of Robert Barry: *All the things I know... 1962 to the present*.  
Photo credit: Bill Orcutt.