



View of "Robert Barry," 2015

Photo: Joshua White

Robert Barry BETHLEHEM BAPTIST CHURCH

Passing through Rudolph Schindler's Bethlehem Baptist Church, one witnessed fifty-one glimmering words, which whispered from the walls of this nearly forgotten architectural monument. One of only a few modernist masterpieces still intact in South Central Los Angeles, and one of even fewer located in this once-segregated neighborhood (the result of restrictive housing covenants), the church was built in 1944 to serve an African American congregation. It would later be sold and then abandoned before undergoing a partial renovation by Reverend Melvin Ashley in 2013. After briefly serving his congregation, Faith-Build International, the church is up for sale once again. Gallerist Thomas Solomon discovered the vacant site and invited Robert Barry, the inveterate champion of nearly invisible interventions that nonetheless engage the (often overlooked) architecture that surrounds us, to propose a project.

The building, whose recently repainted cruciform tower punctuates the sky, stands in contrast to the liquor store, auto shop, and coin laundry that surround it in this modest working-class neighborhood. As one entered the church, the horizontal bands of the building's stucco facade gave way to shifting light within the hushed interior. Below Douglas-fir ceiling rafters, Barry installed twelve-inch-tall, almost translucent Century Gothic vinyl letters adhered directly to the walls. These crisscrossed the white interior walls of the spacious two-story structure, some inscribed diagonally, upside down, or backward, each word nearly invisible until the passing sun revealed it. Within this storied church, the spare, scintillating letters took on gravity and resonance. Yet although the scattered text invited guesses as to why certain words were chosen and installed in particular locations, attempts at gauging their meaning were easily frustrated.

While places of worship are, by definition, vessels for a faith that is ultimately ineffable, this faith is kindled through the recitation of sacred words. Barry's spare installation danced around the nameless, hinting at an ethereal force. As I paced the concrete floor, stepped across the altar and walked past the simple wooden cross behind it, I encountered words such as MYSTERIOUS, ALMOST, PASSION, ACTUAL, LOOKING, BECOMING. The words hovered between the dematerialized sterility of Conceptualism and the spiritual potency of prayer. Barry has spent half a century engaging the invisible--from ultrasonic radiation and electromagnetic energy to telepathic channels. While his Conceptual cohorts Lawrence Weiner and Joseph Kosuth apply text to, by turns, theatrical and theoretical effect, Barry's use of language is less directed, more open-ended. His words streak over the surfaces of buildings, inviting us to give whatever intellectual, emotional, or, as here, spiritual heft we would to the words and to the spaces they adorn. With the gentlest of touches, Barry's installation gracefully matched the extraordinary atmosphere in which the viewer experienced it.