

BOMB — Artists in Conversation

Art : Interview
by Marjorie Welish

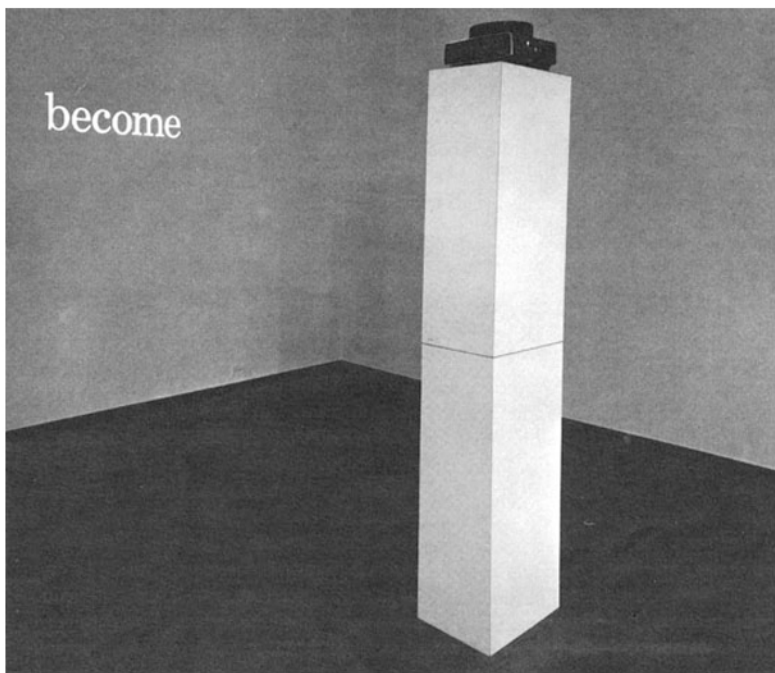
Problematic as it is fascinating, verbal art creates a vexed domain of textual and graphic interaction. As the Russian Futurists showed us 100 years ago, it aggressively redefines the icon, exploding sentences and imploding words and floating them across a page to put the concrete nature of the morpheme at the disposal of verbal music. We really have not outflanked these and other avant-garde visual experiments pursued a century ago. Nor have we improved upon the early contributions to agitprop, in which communication rather than pure expression drives verbal art toward a political purpose. Yet the ongoing interest in the arts of intermedia, together with a newly sociological construal of art, has brought about a revival. Three veterans of the practice who continue to produce verbal art though the cultural mood swings of the fickle art world—and art market—and who distinguish themselves from the wannabes by actually possessing a grasp of the verbal dimension are Robert Barry, Martha Rosler, and Nancy Spero.

Though the term makes him uncomfortable, Robert Barry has been linked with conceptual art for 20 years because the perceptual nature of his art puts language at our disposal in such a way as to raise questions of knowledge. Certainly, seeing faint or cut-off words on canvas puts us at the threshold of perception, where legibility and intelligibility are inextricably linked. Meanwhile, the poetic sensibility of his word paintings has been overlooked.

Robert Barry: I'm not exactly sure I'm happy with the term, "conceptual art," or even the term, "language." I don't work with language. I work with words. I certainly don't use text. I'm not a text artist.

Marjorie Welish Why not?

RB In most of that art, the text is usually so banal. For the most part, it's text you have to



Robert Barry, *Somehow*, 1976. 81 slides projected at 15 second intervals in carousel projector, #0 – #80, between each word are blanks. Photo: courtesy Leo Castelli.

read to get the meaning. And my work's not about that at all. I started using language as text to try and describe some situation that wasn't really visible and draw the viewer or the perceiver into the work. When I began to look at single words projected on the wall—just the word and the light against the darkness—I began to focus my work on the individual word or phrase. Instead of trying to use text to convey an idea or meaning, I became interested in the individual power of the word to convey emotions or feelings.

MW Then why did you, in the '80s, turn to the medium of painting?

RB I had been working with color for several years. The best way of using color is to paint it. There's also a perverse streak in me. The idea of making painting, which was such a taboo in the '70s within the so-called conceptual art community, really intrigued me. I wouldn't have done it if I didn't think I could bring to painting something personal, something different.

MW What I mean is, because painting, in the '60s, had come to represent almost a purely retinal domain, construing itself as a color field, your return to painting courted that danger.

RB I'm certainly interested in the physical aspect of art.

MW Your paintings in the '60s were committed to being optical, and materialist....

RB Spatial, also.

MW ... embodying visual information, not mental, theoretical, or conceptual information.

RB I had moved to a point with the paintings where there was a very strong physical component to them, a situational component. Where they were and when they were hung was as important as what was in them. So I became very concerned with elements of space and time.

MW If you were interested in color, how did you see your work moving or changing as a result of implementing color fields that featured verbal elements?

RB The color was the context, or the place, for the words. Instead of having printed words on white paper, or spoken, or shown in a gallery situation, the color represented another kind of space in which the words could function. And so I saw this—if you want to call it a return to painting—as a very legitimate practical direction to take. I hadn't made paintings for 20 years, and when I started using color again I was still very hesitant to make paintings. I had been painting on walls, and painting on paper, using colored gels for projections.... Making paintings seemed a logical step.

MW It is a logical, practical step. But because your work assumed the format of painting, but was decidedly verbal, I've often wondered whether you were aware of the development of concrete poetry, and the performance practice of Jackson MacLow, or Alan Kaprow?

RB Yes, I was aware of them, and I have to say I made a very conscious effort not to get too involved in that. I certainly have a great respect for poetry, but I'm not a poet. And I don't really know very much about the history of poetry.

MW The antecedents for combining words and their spatiality go back, at least in our time, to the Russian Futurists and their visualization of words on the page with, as you know, an asyntactic order.

RB I know what you mean.

MW I wonder whether you've avoided expressive language in order to distinguish yourself not only from the precedent set by the Abstract Expressionists, but also from certain historical uses of language.

RB Yes, certainly. One of the motivations for making art, at least for me, is to try and equal in some way the feeling of the intensity you get from artists whose work you like a lot. Who made you want to be an artist. Not to imitate them, but to convey something as profound or powerful that you feel from their work.

MW To what purpose did you shape the visual aspect of your verbal art? You have been defining your art by the boundaries of what it is not.

RB Well, in the beginning I left the look of the words up to the people who were printing them. If they appeared in a magazine or on a mailer, I would use the standard text that was being used in the magazine. The only thing I would supply would be a typed/handwritten note as to what words I wanted used. So the decision was out of my hands. But that really isn't enough. Then I tried to develop a style, a look, that was not too obtrusive, but personal. When I speak the words, I have my own voice and inflections. When I use other people's voices to speak the words in sound pieces, they have their own quality. So now I have certain procedures and certain looks which I find useful for me. It's intuitive, it's not calculated, it's just what I think works well within an architectural setting or within the frame of a painting.

MW How can these words conjure a kind of affective space, without your having committed yourself to an expressive language?

RB How can I do that without committing myself to an expressive language?

MW By your elimination of gesture, by regimenting the stuff of language so that it is visually uniform...

RB I tried that early on and it worked pretty successfully, but I wanted to move on to other things. I said before, there is this physical component to things and instead of fighting it, I went with it and used it in my work. I'm basically an intuitive artist, and I work with what feels right to me. Any analysis is always after the fact. I do look for words that speak to me, words that are usable in a context. In these sometimes grand situations, or when I sometimes use very dramatic colors, I may include

words with which I want to capture the viewer's attention. I want them to speak to the viewer. And by the way, they've been reduced to a rather small selection, I find myself using the same words over and over again. Less and less do I see new words coming onto my list. It's become a signature group of words that one can see repeated in different contexts, which is an idea that I worked with back in the late '60s and early '70s. Whether the words were on a mailer or on a magazine or drawn on a wall, context would determine, ultimately, the meaning of the work.

MW You say that you add fewer and fewer words or phrases to your list.

RB Yes.

MW And do you work with those as fixed constellations? Or, do you work with them as individual elements to which you add one and from which you subtract another?

RB Both. For instance, I just recently did a piece for a collector's entranceway, staircase, and vestibule in his home. He sent me some photographs of the space. I had seen the apartment before it was finished so I had some idea what the space was. I compiled a list of about 35 words that I thought might be usable based on the situation, his family, and the kind of people who live there.

MW Useful in their neutrality or useful in their associations?

RB Both, but mostly in their associations. So I brought this list with me and we worked from it. I didn't make any additions and there were more words than I really needed, so we eliminated about 10. I think we ended up with about 27 words. Sometime before that, I did a chapel in Amsterdam which was a completely different situation. The priest who was in charge of this chapel had some ideas, and submitted about four or five words which I thought were very strange, words I would never think of using. I was very careful about this because I didn't want to let my ideas about religion and being an old ex-Catholic get in the way. I really wanted to make a space that was very reverential. And the priest came up with some words that I would never think of using....

MW May I ask what?

RB One I used was "crucial." Some I didn't use. Also, the words had to be translated into Dutch. Lately, I've been working in French, and German, and Dutch, and having an interesting time working with translations. I mean, in your own mind the words are always translated into what you want them to mean anyway. Actually, the next couple of installations are going to be in languages which are not my own, French and German.

MW If that's the case, and you work intuitively, what sense will you have of the words and their referential overtones if you're going to be manipulating a language foreign to you?

RB I have to work with a translator who becomes a collaborator. Sometimes it takes more than one translator to get some idea of the possible meanings that might be usable. I present a list of words that I think might be appropriate and then what I get back are either statements saying that a word is untranslatable or has no single equivalent. Or they come up with three or four other possibilities and we get together and discuss them. Sometimes the ideas submitted are much more interesting than what I originally had in mind. And so it's a give and take. I work with the people who are associated with the situation. I like working with the local craftsmen who paint the words, mix the colors, things like that.

MW Anyone looking at your art cannot help but note—and this is certainly one thing that initially impressed me—how careful the word selection seems to be even when the words are commonplace. The word "resonant" is old-fashioned, but there is an attuned verbal field that you do arrive at. I do believe some care has gone into either neutralizing over-colorful words, or balancing certain affective language with certain cognitive language. And also placing a word having to do with a psychological state in an unexpected place in a visual field.

RB That's exactly what it's about. Your phrase is a good one, creating some state of balance. The juxtaposition of words, the placement, whether they're right-side up or upside-down, are all very carefully considered, including their color, their size,

their length, how to balance short words with long words, some words which are made up of two separate words against those which are not. And the corrected balance of words which might conjure up a similar feeling. I don't want the piece to come across with some sort of political or overly emotional message. So that sense of balance and care is something I think about. This idea of working in other languages—an installation in Germany went through about four or five different translations, including those of the student helpers who questioned the meanings even as they were painting the words onto the wall. So, even then, it was getting a final interpretation of my original ideas. I found that wonderful, absolutely. As soon as it was translated, it got out of my control a little bit. It opened up a whole other more flexible area.

MW The issue that intrigues me is your manipulation of the actual legibility of words, as opposed to their inferences or implications. In other words, physiological understanding versus psychological understanding.

RB In some ways, I want the perceiver to complete the piece. And occasionally, I may just present a part of a word, the last two or three letters of a word, or even a single letter, so that he doesn't really know what the word might be, or even if I had a specific word in mind. Also, I need to utilize the architecture or utilize the edge of the painting or the edge of the paper to emphasize this. And I also like this idea that the work really extends out beyond the space that it's in, not just visually, but also conceptually.