

로버트 배리

Robert Barry

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Robert Barry *Not Personal*

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The city of Daegu is a long way from the small residential town in New Jersey where the Conceptual artist Robert Barry lives and works. Yet despite the distance between these two very different locations, Barry prefers to think his art will communicate to anyone in any place provided they take the time to understand it. While the English words used by the artist may appear foreign in relation to Hangul, it is important to know their meaning is less significant than how he has chosen to use them. Whether on canvas or painted directly on the wall, the words of Robert Barry resonate in a manner that reminds us of how we speak, how we read, and how language communicates to ourselves and to one another. While observing the artist's paintings, wall installations, and related word-objects, we might think of ourselves as living and breathing words as being capable of communicating our deepest feelings. This kind of sensibility comes very close to art, whether or not the signs are in English or Hangul. Words in art are like any other kind of art; they speak to us.

I would like this essay to serve as an introduction to the artist's work and to articulate his profound and influential point of view as a founding member of Conceptual art. The paintings, drawings, wall pieces, videos, and various ephemera, chosen by the curator Dr. Soojung Hyun for inclusion in this exhibition, extend from the 1960s through to the present. As I have been led to believe, this is the first time a solo exhibition focusing on the work of a major Conceptual artist has been shown in the Republic of Korea. For this reason, I take considerable pride in introducing Mr. Barry's work to both enthusiasts and first-time viewers, and to explaining some of the key ideas the artist has chosen to put forth.

I began having conversations with Robert Barry as early as 1976. I was then a doctoral student beginning to write my dissertation at New York University. I had decided to write on Conceptual art because, at the time, it was a relatively recent development in New York, and consequently, I wanted my dissertation to address issues relative to the present. Considering the number of artists I interviewed for this project, Robert Barry stood out for two reasons: one, the consistency in his manner of work; and two, his ability to clarify complex ideas involving words and language. I believe this is evident in our early "discussion" from 1983 (published by Karl Kerber in Bielefeld, 1986). In retrospect, I would characterize our motive for these discussions as being related to Martin Buber's concept of the "dialogical encounter," which may be the better way - the more significant way - for critics and artists to arrive at an understanding of a work of art as it is being discussed on the same platform.

Today I still find Robert Barry's thinking to be accurate, unobtrusive, understated, and to the point. His ability to speak in a way that parallels how he thinks and, more implicitly, how he works as an artist is both subtle and refined. His intonations feel like the voice of an artist - in contrast to posing as a professor or theorist. His easy-going manner is attractive as he gives unwavering attention to the various questions put forth. When he reflects on a topic of special interest, he goes directly to the matter. He does not resist or equivocate. In essence, Barry has an ability to speak about complex and paradoxical issues in a simple and direct way as they are frequently and unsuspectingly encountered in Conceptual art.

As an artist, Robert Barry is known for his ability to effectively develop a way of working that reduces aesthetic form into a palpable idea. For example, in his Untitled (Monofilament pieces) from 1968, Barry began by placing a vertical wire from the ceiling to the floor where it was fastened to a round steel cylinder. Later another wire was stretched horizontally across the ceiling; and finally a third variation connected the ceiling to

the wall. The purpose of these experiments was to show that art could include not just the wall, where a painting would hang, but the entire space of a room. The fact that the wires or threads (nylon and copper) were barely visible suggested the transformation of form into space. Later the same year he began to replace the threads and wires with sound. By setting up an invisible “energy field” based on the transmission of sound, the artist created his 90 mc Carrier Wave (FM) piece, using electrical air waves instead of wires. By investigating the expansion of meaning in art through the absence of material, he was also expanding the space of art from a wall into a room and finally into sounds being received from elsewhere through the use of the audio equipment, such as a transmitter and batteries.

The notion of creating art as an idea further suggested the possibility of “touching” the idea as if it had a reality of its own. This would eventually lead the artist to think of art as a language and thereby to use words that could elicit fundamental human feelings rather than dictionary definitions. In his early Psychic Series (1969), human communication required neither batteries nor transmitters. Rather it depended on the transmission of silence, which he documented through a single sentence, as follows:

All the things I know
but of which I am not
at the moment thinking
- 1:36 PM. June 15, 1969

There is little doubt of the contemplative aura that such a phrase would bring to the viewer. Several of these sentences would be inscribed by the artist in 1969, each of which contained the absence of something “psychic” – but nonetheless present at the same time. Here is another example: “Something that is taking shape in my mind and will sometime come to consciousness.” Later in 1970-71, Barry began his “word lists” that appeared as a single sentence with multiple words listed vertically on the page. These words would suggest a very general phenomenon without any specificity. At this point, he discovered that he was dealing with language in an ambiguous manner, specifically in how he chose and placed the words.

Indeed, words are the medium that viewers associate with Barry. When we look at the wall, the paper, or the canvas, we see English words printed in a standard typeface. Often we will look and read the words simultaneously. Instead of painting or drawing from the perspective of a formal composition, Barry is interested in getting to the core of an idea, which is more abstract. He is interested in ideas that encompass the way words hold meaning, but not in the literal sense. Rather they function as printed objects in space that allow us to reflect on our personal sense of being. While they do not provide any real information, they are intended to provoke our ability to think, to feel, and to interpret our sense of being at a particular moment in time.

In recent conversations (including the videotaped interview made for this exhibition), Barry has made clear the notion that in everyday life we are constantly surrounded by words that try to influence, seduce, or rally us for some predetermined (commercial or political) cause; but, at the same time, there are other more beneficial uses for words. They can be used to calm our sensibilities and to generate thoughts and feelings. He is interested in words that function on this level. He would like the English words he chooses to open up the possibility of the imagination in an intimate manner that is both personal and not personal. By “not personal” he wants viewers to have a certain distance from his work; therefore, inferring the absence of prescribed meaning to which viewers must respond. Rather he would like his audience to read and to think about the words as a state of mind, a temporal reflection of how one is feeling at the moment while standing in front of his Horizontal 4 Part Light Blue-Gray Painting (2016), for example, in which each part measures 60 inches square with words inscribed on a light blue field.

There is no literary meaning in Barry’s art. His words are meant to raise questions as to how they were chosen or why they exist. His words are found by chance or accidentally while reading an article in The New York Times or any other periodical. Once the words are chosen, Barry will contemplate the sound of each one and

study its appearance as to how they might be heard or read in everyday life. It is not an easy task. He ruminates over the words until he is able to sense the individual character of each of them. The arrangement of the words on the canvas or on the wall appears as literal or physical, but not as containers of literary meaning. They are isolated one from another in time even as they occupy the same space on the canvas or on the wall.

By the late 1960s, Barry's works were being published and shown by a little-known New York gallerist named Seth Siegelaub who had become an advocate for Conceptual art. In addition to Barry, Siegelaub worked with other artists that included Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner, Douglas Huebler, and then briefly with Carl Andre, Sol Lewitt, and Robert Morris (on a project known as the Xerox Book from 1968, where each artist was given 25 pages to produce a work). Together these artists constituted one of the most important developments in twentieth century American art since the extended hey-day of Abstract Expressionism. Later, Conceptual art was introduced in New York as a form of art, but without form. Rather Conceptual art was a type of art rendered in terms of language, which soon became known in the late 60s as "dematerialization" or art as language that de-emphasized material form.

It was not until powerful European gallerists, such as Paul Maenz, Yvon Lambert, and Conrad Fischer, began to take notice of Conceptual art that Americans started to pay attention; but even then, it evolved slowly. Meanwhile, Barry was given an important solo exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 1974, which generated a series of intermittent, though high caliber exhibitions throughout Europe. This continued into the late 70s and 80s, and occurred despite the relative lack of attention being given to Conceptual art in New York. This became particularly evident during the 1980s as the art market reverted to more traditional forms that promoted neo-expressionist figuration in painting and sculpture.

At this juncture in the 1980s, there was an ambiguity between artists affiliated with Conceptual Art and those on the verge of becoming theorists who were moving stealthily in the direction of Postmodernism. Prior to the advent of this phenomenon, Conceptualists like Robert Barry and Douglas Huebler worked according to their intentions. Being less interested in formulating predetermined theories, they allowed their ideas to evolve through the process of working (as artists). Their approaches were different from Conceptual artists, Lawrence Weiner and Joseph Kosuth, whose references to theory, especially in Kosuth, tended to be more speculative. In general, the stated intentions among these four artists were rarely as dense or distant as those found in the newly arrived Postmodernists, specifically among academicians and scholars whose reputations became well-known in New York by the late 70s.

Whereas Barry's position on Conceptual art continued to be about art, Postmodernism was more about the sociology of art or a quasi-social science involving theories that contained a type of analytical jargon that began to fill journals, magazines, and books. Theories came both from the inside and outside of art and spread like viruses infesting a vast terrain of supporters that would soon become labeled "politically correct." As these supporters began moving from one academic theory to the next, they "appropriated" the jargon of theory in order to enhance their authoritative positions. But none of this interested Barry who was more involved in clarifying his own work in contrast to giving himself a postmodern mystique. Whereas Conceptual art ran parallel to philosophy, Postmodernism was more about advancing the rhetoric of art world strategies, less about art than of an invented sociology.

Thus, postmodern artists were given an infinite number of appropriations and interventions - all hovering in a vast network from which they might elicit preferences that avoided the possibility of a heightened cognitive sensibility, the latter being a fundamental concern to Barry.

I want to return to the title of Robert Barry's exhibition in Daegu, a title that I happily decided to appropriate for my essay- "Not Personal."

I say "happily" because the title was a collaboration between the artist and myself. When he asked that I choose a title, I decided to borrow a word from a work in the exhibition that had been shown previously at the Mary Boone Gallery in New York. I chose "Personal" from Gold Circle (2016). The artist thought about it and

then took a pen and wrote the word “Not” in front of it; so the title became “Not Personal.” Because he is interested in language, Barry enjoys combining what is present with what is absent.

Earlier, I suggested that what is “Not Personal” is also “Personal”—that the absence found in the “Not Personal” may easily transform into the presence of the “Personal.” There is no doubt that both absence and presence function as equal components in relation to language. While the past tense is absent in the present, the present never totally abandons the past. Rather than reading the Barry’s title as an opposition, we might consider the possibility that the “Not Personal” holds the capacity to convert to the “Personal” at any given time. Therefore, the title of this exhibition functions as an ambivalent sign, a Taoist sensibility with an indeterminate path that rarely goes one way. Like the Tao, the “Not Personal” may suddenly change its course and take us in another direction we never have expected to go.