

## FAITHFULLY FEMALE: THE NEW WORK OF IRENE BARBERIS

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Yielding, pliable, embroidered, draped, stretched, leaning, hanging, drooping. Irene Barberis' pink plastic sculptures rejoice in the minimal and conceptual art of the mid-twentieth century, in particular that of Eva Hesse and Sol LeWitt, while taking us on a spiritual high towards synthetic consumerism. Interested in spatial compositions and the sculptural possibilities of objects, Barberis has made installations in her studio since 1976; carefully configuring still life arrangements to explore form and composition in the third dimension. Nowadays, she deploys plastic as her preferred medium with its sheen, transparency and luminosity, just some of the qualities of this everyday, technological material.

Barberis' contribution to the exhibition *Intersections* is a multi-faceted body of work titled *Feminale: Visions and Dreams (Faith and Female Series)*. Her new work '...focuses on the nexus between the intensely personal and formal, the logical and non-rational, the intuitive and objective. It utilises pneumatically the artist's measured breath, along with the ultra-colouration and surfaces in the latest PVC.'<sup>1</sup> Working in plastics and pneumatics, Barberis explores notions of faith and the female. Using her own breath to inflate the sculptures, we are reminded of the first and last breath in the cycle of life. In addition, breath connotes both intimacy and effort: the essence of being and survival.

Plastic, that ubiquitous substance with its extraordinary range of properties - both alluring and repellent - has been used by many artists since the 1960s. Familiar in daily life, it still seems strange and incongruous. Yet the principle of plasticity is central to artistic practice. The visual arts were once widely referred to as 'the plastic arts' for that reason. Plastic heralds the endless possibilities of forming and shaping new things.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the associative range for plastic includes hot-air balloons, outer-space travel kits and modern kitchenware.

Literally embedded in ancient texts, Barberis' buoyant works are intricately inscribed with various languages, primarily derived from early Biblical visionary excerpts, Barberis skilfully interweaves these insights into her adaptation of a minimal conceptual practice. This conflation of conceptual art with evocative texts merges geometry and rational logic within an intuitive and

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<sup>1</sup> Quote from correspondence between the artist and author, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Many artists have worked with plastics such as Christo, Claes Oldenburg, Yayoi Kusama, Takashi Murakami and Christopher Langton to name a few. It was the focus of an exhibition called *Plastic Fantastic*, curated by Ben Curnow, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 1997.

mysterious system. Texts appear as adornment, embellishing conceptual forms with ancient sources embroidered into the sculptural. Obsessive and fastidious, the layering of text adds unique properties to this medium.

In *The Subversive Stitch*, Rozsika Parker traces the historical domestication of embroidery as a gendered and decorative activity, marginalised as a form of craft.<sup>3</sup> Originally relegated to the sphere of Victorian women, Barberis takes embroidery into the realm of conceptual art and language, overturning its previous status. Barberis has commented on her use of thread: “Edges have been important too, the drawn line. Eva Hesse and her use of cord into random and formal shapes inspired the use of thread in collaged, painted and tissue works.”<sup>4</sup>

In 1969, Eva Hesse produced *Expanded Expansion*, the same year that LeWitt wrote: “Artists are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach.”<sup>5</sup> *Expanded Expansion* is one of the first minimalist and conceptual sculptural works by a woman. It was exhibited in the exhibition *Anti-illusion: Process/Materials* at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.<sup>6</sup> Barberis pays homage to Hesse with a pink rendition of her seminal work titled *lean / expanded expansion*. Here, cheesecloth and latex are replaced with iridescent pink plastic, remodelled into a series of drapes and folds inflated by the artist’s own breath. Pink, of course, signals the feminine, but also a sense of jubilation and vivaciousness.

Expansively hovering above the viewer, this monumental work leans precariously along the gallery walls. Replicating Hesse’s shape and drapery, Barberis takes this work into the current milieu by adopting shiny, pink plastic. Playing with weight and density, fragility and solidity, she reinterprets Hesse with an engulfing, diaphanous environment stretched along the museum walls. Imposing in scale, *lean / expanded expansion* is like a stage curtain. Barberis regenerates Hesse’s iconic work that is in a serious state of disintegration: a sculpture that when first made was softly draping and translucent, is now a rigid, tawny hulk.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the making of the feminine*, The Women’s Press, London, 1984.

<sup>4</sup> Quote from correspondence between the artist and author, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Sol LeWitt quoted in ‘Sentences on Conceptual Art’, *Sol LeWitt: a retrospective*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, 2000, p. 371; reprinted from *Art-Language*, no. 1, May 1969, pp. 11-13.

<sup>6</sup> ‘*Accretion and Expanded Expansion*’, *Eva Hesse*, co-organised by Elisabeth Sussman for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Dr. Renate Petzinger for Museum Wiesbaden, Germany, 2002, pp. 246-250. I am grateful to Irene Barberis for sharing this reference with me.

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of the complex conservation issues surrounding Hesse’s sculptures see ‘Uncertain Mandate: A Roundtable Discussion on Conservation Issues’, *ibid.*, pp. 291-293.

Eva Hesse died of a brain tumor at the age of thirty-four last June. In the five previous years she had produced a body of work – sculpture and drawings – unique in its fusion of formal and emotional intensity.<sup>8</sup>

Like Hesse, Barberis imbues her sculptures with formal and emotional qualities while experimenting with material and form.

From 1974 to 1975, Irene Barberis was in New York with her boyfriend Robert Hunter, the renowned Australian minimalist painter. The young couple was travelling overseas for nine months while Hunter participated in various international exhibitions. Barberis recalls a prolonged stay in Carl André's studio and being invited to the MOMA exhibition *Eight Contemporary Artists* curated by Jennifer Licht, which included Robert Hunter, Vito Acconci and Brice Marden, amongst others. As she was quietly sitting on a windowsill at the opening, a gentleman sat beside her and they began a conversation: it was the conceptual artist Sol LeWitt. An ongoing friendship developed over the ensuing decades. They have exchanged postcards and letters, anecdotes and advice, as well as artworks. LeWitt has had a significant impact on younger artists as a generous mentor and collector, owning more than 2,600 objects, mainly collected through trade with other artists.<sup>9</sup> Barberis is included in his personal collection from which a number of exhibitions have been generated at different museums.

Barberis returned to Melbourne in the mid-1970s and commenced post-graduate studies in painting at the Victorian College of the Arts. During this influential period, her view of the universe altered and she was compelled to allow a profound experience to affect her burgeoning practice. In 1979, she corresponded with LeWitt about her quandary and he urged her to “push forward” with her ideas, even if they were unpopular in the same way that he encouraged Eva Hesse's unorthodox practice and methods. LeWitt wrote to both Hesse and Barberis a similar, heartfelt motivational letter. To Hesse:

Just stop thinking, worrying, looking over your shoulder, wondering, doubting, fearing, hurting, hoping for some easy way out...Stop it and just DO....Don't worry about cool, make your own uncool. Make your own, your own world. If you fear, make it work for you - draw and paint your fear and anxiety...<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Lucy R. Lippard, 'Eva Hesse: The Circle', *From the centre: feminist essays on women's art*, Dutton, New York, 1976, p. 155.

<sup>9</sup> LeWitt's influence on contemporary art has been extensive. Artists such as Adrian Piper, Chuck Close and Louise Lawler as well as the composer Philip Glass, to name a few, have been deeply affected by his practice and generosity. His entire collection is on long-term loan to the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut (his hometown). See Andrea Miller-Keller, 'Varieties of Influence: Sol LeWitt and the Arts Community', *Sol LeWitt: a retrospective*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, 2000, p. 371; reprinted from *Art-Language*, no. 1, May 1969, pp. 73-87.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.* p. 79. This letter has influenced young women artists since it was first published in 1976. Janine Antoni, for example shares this text with all of her young students and assistants.

Barberis' titles utilise verbs – *lean, blow, fold, scroll* - embracing the 'act of doing'.

LeWitt's most characteristic sculptural works are based on connected open cubes and have titles like *Modular Wall Structure* and *Double Modular Cube*. Working with modules and systems, LeWitt's early wall drawings are based on grids and geometrical forms. Barberis has an in-depth knowledge of LeWitt's oeuvre from his early wall drawings to the more recently painted architectural works. Living partially in Spoleto, Italy, Barberis interprets this latter body of work in relation to LeWitt's proximity to church architecture and its geometric decoration. For Barberis, "the formal and the mystical are at the heart of my practice."<sup>11</sup> LeWitt has been a constant source of inspiration.

*blow / open ended cube system* comprises two inflatable crosses derived from nineteenth century Bible quilts, or as Barberis terms them "scripture spreads" embroidered by many women. Using a sewing machine, Barberis painstakingly inscribes each component, which is then gently inflated. Tremendous labour is involved in these iconic inscriptions. One cross contains texts on breath in Ancient Greek, Middle English and Modern English written on the surface in white ink while the other has embroidered texts about breath from scriptures encased within her own breath inside the plastic.<sup>12</sup> Ad Reinhardt's repeated use of the cross as a sombre and aloof motif is now exultantly rendered in pink plastic by Barberis. Suspended in the middle of the gallery, the inflatable crosses sit above clear, acrylic floor sculptures perched on an opalescent base. Dealing with architectonics and systems, these objects replicate LeWitt's open-ended cube system, which was originally rendered in wood. Barberis interlocks formal elements of the cross and cube with a playful textuality.

The third element in Barberis repertoire is *fold / inflated triangle* comprising a radiant, three-metre circle made of glycine paper that recalls a mediaeval vellum. Symbolic of skin, this form is embroidered with biblical texts describing visions and dreams sewn into a large colour wheel. It drapes over a large, clear wedge allowing the viewer to peer into these rainbow colours. We are reminded of Johannes Itten's colour theory and Sonia Delaunay's patterned concentric circles. Another source for Barberis is the isolated practice found in

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<sup>11</sup> Quote from correspondence between the artist and author, 2004.

<sup>12</sup> The texts are: Genesis Chapter 2: verse 7, 'Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man (...mankind) became a living being/soul.'

Luke 23: 46, 'And Jesus, crying out with a loud voice, said, "Father, into Thy Hands I commit My Spirit". And having said this He breathed His last.'

John 20:20 – 22, '...And when He had said this, He showed them both His hands and His side. And the disciples therefore rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus therefore said to them again, "Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you." And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, "receive the Holy Spirit"...

fifteenth century scriptoriums and monasteries, which utilise a language of biblical, colour symbolism within a shape.<sup>13</sup>

In *scroll / apocalypse text*, Barberis' ongoing influence of language has resulted in silicon texts from *The Apocalypse* jumbled into tiny letters, their sense of endless disarray as they tumble into various configurations. Like small jewels, these letters are incoherent but inherently beautiful and mysterious. Others hang scroll-like onto the floor, decipherable if the viewer spends time focussing on their intricate forms. Here language, geometry and faith sit comfortably, side by side. Ultimately, Barberis takes us on a linguistic journey towards vibrant pink pneumatics. We are enveloped by their sumptuous form: the result is faithfully female.

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<sup>13</sup> See artist statement on plastic colour wheel, 2004. Barberis has a strong research element to her practice having completed a thesis entitled 'The Breakdown of Space and the Build Up of Colour' (1977) at the Victorian College of the Arts; an MA entitled 'The Spiritual and the Mundane – Aspects of Scripture in the Modern World' (1994) and a PhD entitled 'Abstract and Figurative Elements of The Apocalypse and its Representations' (2000) at Victoria University. She has undertaken research overseas in particular looking at mediaeval manuscripts at the Piermont Morgan Library in New York, the British Library in London, in many collections in Oxford and Cambridge, and in Paris, at the Bibliotheque Nationale.