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**“FINDING A BODY”: PERFORMANCE
AS PRACTICE AND THEORY
IN THE WORK OF BARBARA T. SMITH**

Summary:

This paper analyzes the performative practice of Barbara T. Smith as well as the artist's theoretical preoccupation with performance as it relates to her experience as a woman and female artist during the 1960s and 70s. Drawing from the material of Smith's personal archive housed at the Getty Research Institute, the paper will present key elements of her performative practice and discuss her relationship to the Second Generation of Feminism. It will detail Smith's interrogation of performance for negotiating her own femininity, sexuality, as well as physical and emotional relationships. Smith's archive also reveals the artist's early analytical occupation with performance art. In questioning this novel discipline with regards to its politics, products, but also its boundaries, Smith proves an extraordinary awareness for the complexity and idiosyncrasies of performance art and an unusual responsibility as an artist in questioning, theorizing, and communicating it.

Key words:

Performance Art, Feminist Art, Barbara T. Smith, Artists' Archives

“Art is of essence, not ideals. It comes from fulfilling needs, not roles.”¹

Barbara T. Smith

In 1968, Barbara T. Smith made the difficult decision to devote her entire life to her artistic practice. Smith, who was born in Pasadena, California (1931), had had a long-standing interest in art, having studied painting, art history, and religion at Pomona College. As a married mother of three, however, art had always had a secondary place in her life with sketches and paintings produced in the few undisturbed minutes domestic life granted in a small bedroom converted into a studio in her home. All this, and much more, would change when Smith and her husband filed for divorce after 16 years of marriage after which Smith’s creative production changed forever. Performance became her main vehicle to engage with issues concerning her own body and sexuality, sensuality, and her professional and personal relationships. As she states: “Though the impulses started earlier, my real performances began in the year when I got divorced and represented my way of finding a new beginning in life. To establish a sense of being and identity when I felt I had none.”² The radical shift that her divorce, the loss of custody over her children, and the difficult transition into becoming a single woman and self-sustaining artist marked, is probably nowhere clearer than when immersing oneself in Smith’s notes, her diaries, drawings and sketches. Photorealistic portraits, object studies, and pastel-colored interior designs are suddenly replaced by expressive investigations into the human body and its sexuality, experimental collages, quick studies accompanied by snippets of research and personal thoughts, performance ideas and scores, but especially pages over pages of written interrogations into art and its place in Smith’s life.

Barbara T. Smith’s archive, housed at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles, contains many avenues for following Smith’s evolution into a political artist and specifically for understanding her choice of performance as her primary medium, in which she would over the years produce countless innovative works that put her at the forefront of this nascent form of art. Her notes, scores, and sketches allow for a much more comprehensive understanding of her artistic creations, her motivation and inspirations, especially with regards to her time-specific works. In addition, journal entries, correspondence, or research files serve as highly instructive sources for tracing Smith’s thought process as it relates to women’s place in society and the Second Wave of Feminism, which impacted the social, political, and cultural fabric during which Smith started to produce performance. For this concurrence as well as for Smith’s use of her own body in her work and her interrogation into the emotionality and physicality of male-female relationships, Smith is often aligned with the Feminist art movement by scholars and curators. Yet, her standpoints,

1 Barbara T. Smith papers, diary entry, 1970–71, Barbara T. Smith papers, 2014.M.14, box 8, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute.

2 Barbara T. Smith, typed and annotated script, 1977, Barbara T. Smith papers, 2014.M.14, box 169, folder 1, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute.

actions, and most importantly her work elude standard classifications as “Feminist”, and her archive shows her relationship to Feminism remaining ambivalent. While an analysis of Smith’s relation to the “mainstream” Feminism of the 1960s and 70s, and especially her investigations into her own female reality can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of Feminist thought and its idiosyncratic nature, it is foremost her extensive theoretical preoccupation with the medium of performance that establishes Smith as a political artist. If we consider a contemporary and inclusive understanding of Feminism as an intervention into existing narratives and common beliefs that perpetuate patriarchal systems of historization and knowledge production, then Smith’s interrogation of the ethics, economics, responsibilities, and possibilities of performance art as well as its challenges for artist and audience, offers us alternatives to the canonical and often generalizing discourses that have shaped our understanding of both Feminism and Performance art to date.

Smith’s decision to leave her traditional life and dedicate her life completely to art becomes understandable when considering the absolute interconnectedness with which art and life present themselves to her. To Smith, art amounts to nothing else but a “reality defining endeavor [...]”³ with her work emerging out of her very emotional and physical existence. Her performances are, as she states, “a response to social situations relating to my place in the world. Instead of being an observer in and of life I was responding with my experiences, feelings and retorts to life in the sense of living it.”⁴ (fig. 1)

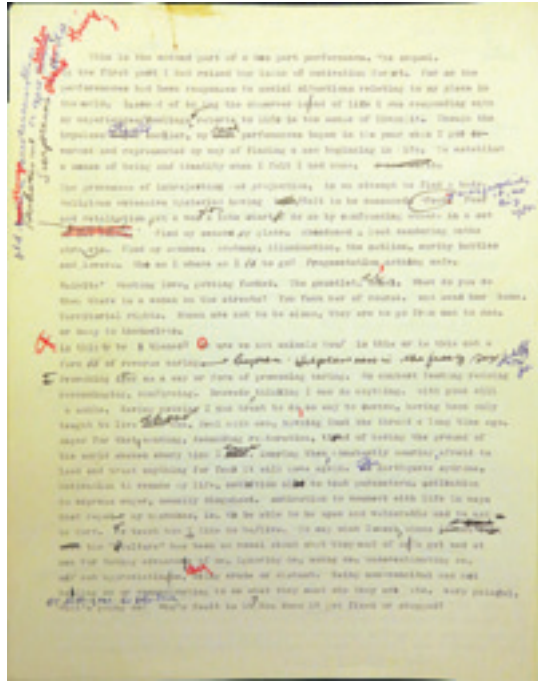


Fig. 1. Barbara T. Smith, typed and annotated script page, 1977, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute (2014.M.14), Box 169, folder 1.

- 3 Barbara T. Smith, typed note, 1977, Barbara T. Smith papers, 2014.M.14, box 169, folder 16, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute.
- 4 Barbara T. Smith, typed and annotated script, 1977, Barbara T. Smith papers, 2014.M.14, box 169, folder 1, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute. Attesting to the strong interrelation in which art and life present themselves to Smith is also the artist’s definition of performance art as works of art that contain actual events instead of mere symbolical manifestations. In an interview with the author, Smith reiterated: “That was another criteria, a criteria of performance to me, and it was that there had to be something literal happening, the person is actually peeing, or the person is actually eating until they are stuffed.”, Interview with the author, March 21st, 2018.



Fig. 2. Barbara T. Smith, typed and annotated auction list for *A Week in the Life* of, 1975, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute (2014.M.14), Box 167, folder 16.

communication will be the original confirmation of the choice of day” (minimum bid \$4). Other items included a joint Merry-go-round ride, reading to each other, a sauna bath, create a meal together, or breakfast in bed. The highest item up for auction was for the artist to spend an entire week living with the buyer for \$70, the details of which were regulated in an eight-point contract. As her records show, all but one of the items were auctioned off.⁵ (fig. 2)

Smith considered *A Week in the Life* of to be one of her most successful pieces at the time, writing that she “managed to use art (performance) and the auction form to enlarge my sphere of people and break out of an isolated situation personally.”⁶ Her intention to offer interaction and exchange with her up for bidding seems to be not without risk. Who would guarantee that the bidding party would stick with exactly what is offered in the contracts and not cross any physical or psychological

The inspirations and ideas behind her works therefore remain as varied and diverse as the challenges she faces as a female artist in a patriarchal society, whose traditional gender roles she had decided to negate. Her 1975 performance *A Week in the Life*, for example, grew out of Smith struggling with a mounting feeling of loneliness and isolation. The piece consisted of an auction and up for bid were a variety of exchanges and interactions with the artist, listed together with the means provided and the minimum bid. The offers ranged from a bus ride together, starting with meeting at a preselected stop and then ride the line to the end station and back (minimum bid \$3), to recording one’s day, described as: “On a preselected day each will make a record in detail of the going-ons, events and feelings of that day and mail this to the other. Zero time will be spent together and sole

5 Barbara T. Smith, typed auction item, Barbara T. Smith papers, 2014.M.14, box 167, folder 6, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute.

6 Barbara T. Smith, typed and annotated script, 1977, Barbara T. Smith papers, 2014.M.14, box 169, folder 1, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute.

boundaries, especially since some of the auction items included rather intimate settings? Much like in her seminal performance *Feed Me* (1973), Smith appears to passively give herself up to be acted on by others, a notion that resulted in the misconception of the artist playing into the objectification of women by making herself available to the “use” by men. In *Feed Me*, Smith had installed herself in the bathroom of the Museum of Conceptual Art, San Francisco, for an entire night, naked on a mattress, with a variety of utensils available for interactive enjoyment such as wine, body oils, food, or marijuana. An audio tape was playing with Smith’s voice demanding “Feed Me!” in a constant loop. Visitors, most of them male, entered the space one by one and interacted with the artist. Smith agreed to be “fed,” however, only if she agreed to accept what was

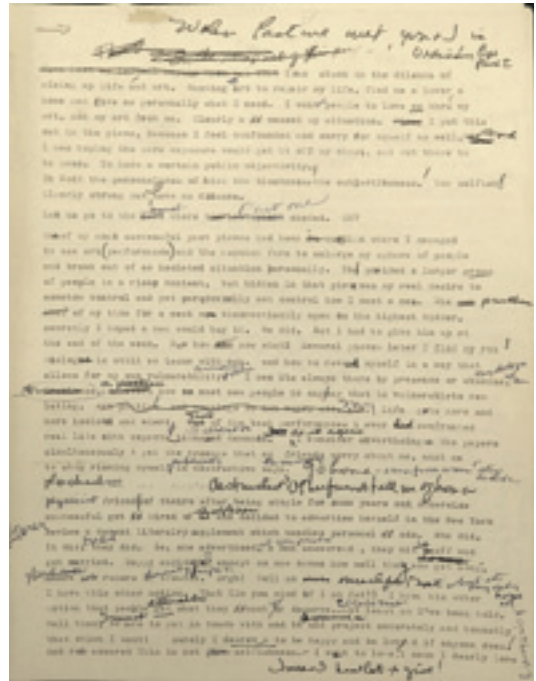


Fig. 3. Barbara T. Smith, typed and annotated script page, 1977, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute (2014.M.14), Box 169, folder 1.

offered to her, thus maintaining control of the space and actively interfering with the masculine-connoted notion of the female nude as “passive” object.⁷ The concept of control is also relevant in *A Week in the Life of* with the artist critically reflecting on it with regards to her relationship to men. The performance, Smith wrote, “provided the larger group of people in a risky context, but hidden in that piece was my real desire to somehow control and yet paradoxically not control how I meet a man. [...]” *A Week in the Life of* was a way for the artist to explore her dialogue with men in a way that allowed her to establish the parameters and find a way to “reveal myself in a way that allows for my own vulnerability and value.”⁸ (fig. 3)

Similarly, Smith’s 1977/78 two-part work *Ordinary Life pt. 1 and pt. 2*, performed in Los Angeles and San Francisco, respectively, served as an interrogation into her relationships with men and especially into her own psyche and emotions as affected by them. In the months prior to these performances, her life, “had

7 For this discussion see also Sandra Esslinger’s review of *The 21st Century Odyssey Part II: The Performances of Barbara T. Smith* at Pomona College Museum of Art in X-TRA Online, <http://x-traonline.org/article/the-21st-century-odyssey-part-ii-the-performances-of-barbara-t-smith/st>

8 Barbara T. Smith, typed and annotated script, 1977, Barbara T. Smith papers, 2014.M.14, box 169, folder 1, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute.



Fig. 4. Barbara T. Smith, drawing of performance setup for *Ordinary Life pt. 1*, 1977, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute (2014.M.14), Box 169, folder 2.



Fig. 5. n. a., negative of performance photograph of *Ordinary Life pt. 1*, 1977, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute (2014.M.14), Box 124, folder 13.

become out of touch with real values, bordering on the dark side,”⁹ with the artist experiencing several discomfoting situations created by encounters with men. The artist utilized her performances to express her distress and as an attempt to create transformational moments that would allow her to return her life to a normal, or at least bearable state. For Smith, the pieces were about “to teach how I like to be/live. To say what I want, since the culture has been so vocal about what they want of me. To get mad at men for taking advantage of me, ignoring me, using me, underestimating me, not appreciate me, they being crude or distant.”¹⁰ (fig. 3) *Ordinary Life pt. 1* consisted of a three-part ritual titled “You cannot solve an existential question in ordinary life,” “You are trying to do it all alone,” and “Success will be yours if you separate business from pleasure,” all key statements in the quandary her life had become. The last part involved the narration of a dream involving artist Robert Irwin, after which Smith opened the piece out into a dialogue with the audience and left. *Ordinary Life pt. 1* also featured a character dubbed by Smith the “mute, dumb, savage.” This character, played in the performance by Cheri Gaulke, was discernible only by its shadow behind a veil and through moans and sighs it emitted. The “mute, dumb, savage”, unable to speak and hidden in plain sight, embodied the artist’s emotional

9 Barbara T. Smith, typed and annotated script, 1977, Barbara T. Smith papers, 2014.M.14, box 169, folder 1, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute.

10 Barbara T. Smith, typed and annotated script, 1977, Barbara T. Smith papers, 2014.M.14, box 169, folder 1, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute.

landscape at times of extreme exhaustion and being confounded by the muddle her life had become.¹¹ (figs. 4, 5)

Ordinary Life pt. 2 started with the artist attempting to pin huge black and white images of herself onto the walls, a difficult endeavor symbolizing her struggle to regain her own body territory by surrounding herself with images of her own body and face. (fig. 6) In addition, Smith frantically ripped junks of paper from a roll on which she scribbled whatever cogent statements came to her mind and tried to affix the notes to the walls as well. The harrowing state of mind that triggered Smith to create *Ordinary Life pt. 1 and 2* becomes palpable in her notes: “The process of introjection and projection, in an attempt to find a body [...] Find my sense, my place. Abandoned, lost, wandering on the streets. [...]. Ecstasy, illumination, the sublime, earthy battles and lovers. Who am I, where am I to go? Fragmentation nothing safe.”¹² (fig. 1) When the artist had just about reached her limit in *Ordinary Life pt. 2*, three women entered the space, approached Smith, held and comforted her before helping her in pinning the texts onto the wall with her images. Ultimately, colorful ribbons were released from the ceiling with which the women decorated themselves, ending the strenuous procedure with a joint celebration. (fig. 7) At last, so Smith, she accepted female help and support in her work.¹³

Smith’s subtle and complex artistic interrogations into her own life and the emotional and physical exchange



Fig. 6. Barbara T. Smith, Xeroxed performance announcement for *Ordinary Life pt. 2*, 1978, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute (2014.M.14), Box 169, folder 1.



Fig. 7. n. a., negative of performance photograph of *Ordinary Life pt. 2*, 1978, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute (2014.M.14), Box 124, folder 14.

11 Interview with the author, March 21st, 2018.

12 Barbara T. Smith, typed and annotated script, 1977, Barbara T. Smith papers, 2014.M.14, box 169, folder 1, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute.

13 Email from the artist, October 22nd, 2018.

between men and women, together with the fact that she maintained personal and professional relationships with men and male peers, at times proved difficult for other, more explicit feminists and feminist artists. As she recounts, Smith maintained personal relationships with men as well as frequent collaborations with male peers.¹⁴ As she recounts: “And nothing, no one liked what I was doing. So the artists I found myself around were all men. And when I first met Suzanne [Lacy], she says: you are doing these pieces just for men, and I said, yeah, well they are the ones that have to learn, they are the ones that have to change. I didn’t understand why she was doing them for women.”¹⁵ As works such as *A Week in the Life of* or *Ordinary Life pt. 1 and pt. 2* show, Smith’s artistic motivation was indeed not of a purely political, but more of a transformational and spiritual nature, with the artist attempting to regain her life, territory, and presence in the world through her art. By means of her work Smith endeavored to re-integrate “a broken psyche,” which the artist experienced as a consequence of the patriarchal social structure surrounding her.¹⁶ The complexity of Smith’s relation with the Second Wave of Feminism, which in its early iterations struck her at times as “too prescriptive,” was addressed by the artist in a 1977 conversation at the Women’s Building in Los Angeles. Smith considered the impact of the Women’s Movement on her artistic practice a “double edged sword.” Where she saw the benefit of having a “body of people who’ve had similar experiences, to have support, to learn about my own self as a woman, [and] find loving friends who I care about,” she also experienced it as limiting for her artistic practice: “And [...] they’re telling me this this, and this. That I have to belong to that, and I have to do this. And I say how can I refuse because my god, I believe in what they’re saying and I have to help them. Or I have to be part of it. [...] I’ve gotten a lot out of it. But at the other end I went backwards, in terms of career [...] And for women there’s double dues. There’s the due of having to make it in the world and the dues of having to incorporate the whole women’s message, because you can’t really talk with any sense without knowing it.”¹⁷

While the highly personal and idiosyncratic nature of Smith’s performances distinguishes them from a more general feminist agenda aimed at a critique of women’s place in society, cultural attitudes, or stereotypization, her

14 Smith was close friends and sometimes collaborated for example with Paul McCarthy, Allan Kaprow, or Kim Jones. Together with Chris Burden and Nancy Buchanan she also founded the infamous F-Space Gallery at UC Irvine, which would become a hub for experimental and performance art in Los Angeles in the 1970s and hosting performances such as Burden’s *Shoot* (1971).

15 Interview with the author, March 21st, 2018.

16 Email from the artist, October 22nd, 2018.

17 Transcript of a dialogue between Arlene Raven, Linda Burnham, Barbara T. Smith, and Cheri Gaulke, 1981, p. 28, Woman’s Building records, box 4, folder 13, Washington, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

practice constitutes at the same time another crucial facet of feminist art, one that emphasizes a subjective reality within the larger cause. In addition, Smith’s unwavering dedication to using her own body as a vehicle for her art, not only in order to investigate into her own physical and emotional existence, but also to mend the Cartesian split of intellect and body, is where the artist feels her works to speak in particular for women. Yet this dedication, which often pushed Smith to the point of exhaustion, also remained the main point of contestation for her friends and other artists: “I get the message that my friends worry about me, want me to stop risking myself publicly in destructive ways. The message is ‘Go home’, even from women, and ‘stay locked in.’¹⁸ (fig. 3)

Smith had been doing an incredible amount of performances in the years leading up to *Ordinary Life*, sometimes up to eight per year. As much as performing and creating works of art was at the core of her existence, she also felt it was taking a toll on her. As the artist recounts, the demanding nature of performance art, however, not only affected herself, but was a rather common issue amongst the first-generation performance artists such as Nancy Buchanan, Paul McCarthy, Chris Burden, or Vito Acconci, with many of whom Smith had close professional relationships. All of these artists, sooner or later, felt the urge to step back and create a critical and necessary distance between themselves and their work. Where Acconci decided to perform in hiding (*Seedbed*, 1972), McCarthy would soon start to introduce props and masks (*Grand Pop*, 1977) and later remove himself entirely from his work (*Human Object*, 1982). Smith had contemplated this solution as well, but: “There was no real difference from how my life was experienced and the work. It provoked from me a total desire to be free of it but the rigors of the art world demanded consistency. [...] The question I was asking inherently was in regard to the nature of art and the artist. If I create from inside the experience, art is one thing. If I stand outside it as manipulator it’s another. The pain I felt was all too real. I wanted in every way to avoid it but something quite merciless was driving me. [...]”¹⁹ Smith remained determined to use her own physical presence in her works but was also highly conscious about the stress and exhaustion this way of working caused her. It was only her explorations into Buddhism and meditation that made it possible for her to continue her work.²⁰

In addition to the physical and psychological strain performance art put on its creators, they were also aware of the criticism their work received from the

18 Barbara T. Smith, typed and annotated script, 1977, Barbara T. Smith papers, 2014.M.14, box 169, folder 1, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute.

19 Barbara T. Smith, script to *Full Jar/Empty Jar*, p. 1, 1974. Barbara T. Smith papers, 2014.M.14, box 165, folder 14, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute.

20 Email from the artist, October 22nd, 2018. The influence of Buddhism, Zen meditation, and yoga can be seen clearly in several of Smith’s works such as *Pure Food* (1973) or *The Vigil* (1978), a collaboration with Suzanne Lacy.

audience, who was exposed to and often incorporated into these novel experimental and radical forms of artistic expression. What these shared concerns prompted was an increasing discussion of performance art by the artists themselves, a critical reflection of the medium's responsibilities, its boundaries, messages, but also its economic value. Was there a line that couldn't and shouldn't be crossed? How far was art able to go? And, from a purely rational point of view, what exactly is performance art, what are its products, what is it that the artist produces economically?

With these questions, that Smith frequently addresses in her writings, the artist proves an early and outstanding awareness of the difficult nature of performance art. In her own works, for example, *With Love from A to B* (1977), a collaboration with Nancy Buchanan, Smith carefully evaluated the messages she sent. The performance, initially staged for the David Ross Talk Show at the College Art Association's convention at the Biltmore Hotel in Los Angeles, was a satirical enactment of a courting attempt not met with reciprocity, played by the artists' hands. It ended with Smith's character, the unsuccessful courter, committing suicide out of pain over the unreturned affection. In the initial performance, Smith took a razor blade and cut her finger to symbolize the death. The artist, however, became increasingly disturbed by what she felt was violent imagery and in particular by the message she felt the work was sending, which alluded to suicide as a solution to unrequited love. What might initially seem small, a tiny cut in a finger, was analyzed by Smith for all its symbolic value and the possible statement being sent to the audience: "Unpredictably this small piece became my realization of personal responsibility and the significance of symbols." The act of physically harming herself, and be it on the smallest scale, was an act that to Smith "made clear [...] at once the difference between chance and will; intent and risk." Despite many of her previous performances such as *Feed Me* or *A Week in the Life of* containing elements of risk in the possibilities of unpremeditated interaction, Smith draws a firm line between "allowing a situation to be open to chance and one for which there is no chance at all."²¹ Also, despite rigorously placing it at the center of her performances, Smith insists: "the body is sacrosanct."²² Smith's discomfort with her act of violence against her own body ultimately prompted her to reperform *With Love from A to B* without the final death and ordering that the original version "never to be shown separately from Version II" or without an explanatory text Smith had written about her relationship with the piece.²³

21 Barbara T. Smith, typed note, 1977, Barbara T. Smith papers, 2014.M.14, box 169, folder 16, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute.

22 Barbara T. Smith, typed note, 1977, Barbara T. Smith papers, 2014.M.14, box 169, folder 4, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute.

23 Barbara T. Smith, typed note, 1977, Barbara T. Smith papers, 2014.M.14, box 169, folder 4, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute.

But also other artist’s works were taken into consideration by Smith such as John Duncan’s *Scare* (1976), where the artist knocked on people’s doors at night, disguised with a mask and fired blank bullets at them, or Kim Jones’ negotiation of his experience of the Vietnam War in *Rat Piece* (1976), which included the killing of live rats.²⁴ Witnessing these harrowing works, their risky nature, and their strong impact on the audience, the question of the boundaries and moral obligations of performance art became even more urgent for Smith. As a result, she proposed a variety of initiatives to tackle the issue in conversation with other artists and from a theoretical point of view. Among other things, in 1978, Smith, together with her friend and collaborator Nancy Buchanan, proposed to the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art (LAICA) to edit a journal issue dedicated solely to the investigation of performance art: “Rather than being a collection of descriptions of individual pieces [...], we foresee this issue as an attempt to examine the many provocative questions raised by Performance Art. In general, we will request contributors to place their subjects in historical frameworks and include projections of possible future directions.”²⁵ Shortly later, she organized a panel dedicated to the “Ethics and Economies of Performance Art” at LAICA where she, together with other performance artists such as Lynn Hershman Leeson, Paul McCarthy, Cheri Gaulke, Allan Kaprow, or Kim Jones, addressed questions surrounding the medium and its idiosyncratic challenges. Among the questions Smith noted for the panel were:

“How do you survive economically?”

“Is pay to be considered different than [for] other art [...]?”

“Is there anything to sell? What?”

“If [performance] is wholly different from other art forms should it survive differently? Preciousness.”

Smith also inquired into the very ideological essence of performance art, asking: “Is it: political, revolutionary, or a service.”²⁶

24 A later performance by Duncan, *Blind Date* (1980) brought these questions to the forefront again. *Blind Date* was an audio recording of the artist having sexual intercourse with a female corpse, played to a horrified audience in Los Angeles. As Smith recalls, the performance highly concerned her and many of her peers. Debating how to best react and make clear their concerns, the artists ultimately decided to shun it and not react to it at all (Interview with the author, March 21st, 2018). Linda Burnham, the editor of High Performance Magazine equally refused to publish an account of the piece. See also Stiles 1998, 227–329.

25 Barbara T. Smith, handwritten note to Ethics and Economies of Performance Art panel, 1978, Barbara T. Smith papers, 2014.M.14, box 171, folder 1, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute. Smith also names her work as a volunteer at the Pasadena Art Museum in the 1960s and her function as chair of the Performance committee as having triggered her theoretical investigations into the medium. Email from the artist, October 22nd, 2018.

26 Barbara T. Smith, handwritten note to Ethics and Economies of Performance Art panel, 1978, Barbara T. Smith papers, 2014.M.14, box 171, folder 1, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute.

With these questions, Smith intervenes with the very foundational impetus behind early performance works, which were often created against the financial and ideological parameters of the commercial art world in that they refused to produce something that could be sold, bought, or exhibited. However, as Smith's notes show, the reality of being a performance artist therefore presented itself rather difficult. Her preoccupation with questions about financial support and sustenance testify to the double-burden that Smith faced during the period of the 1960s and 1970s in that she not only created ephemeral work, which did not provide her with financial stability, but also because as a woman she faced a much harder standing in the art world than her male colleagues. Possibly owing to this situation amongst a growing force of declared Feminist performers around her, Smith was also interested in exploring the relation of Feminist performance art to these questions and asked, among other things: "Is Feminist Performance art to be supported differently than other capitalist art?" She adds: "Rights of passage, shock, ordeal."²⁷

In another note, in which the structure of the panel seems to have already formed further, we read Smith's philosophical answers to the question of "What are we selling?" She writes: "Self + right to unusual indicative behavior. The image of the artist. Vitality. Humor of the unexpected." Building on the recent discussions with her fellow artists and their development, she also ponders: "Why are artists changing? Vito, me, Chris."

Under the segment "Ethics", she prompts artists to explain when and how they came to performance art and also asks: "Experience with your work [...] it's ethical implications on you/others. Your intention. Theorize on the right or wrongness," encouraging artists to investigate into their motivation, but also their work's impact and effect on themselves and their audience. Based on her thoughts and discussions on performances that she felt crossed a moral boundary such as Duncan's or Jones' work, she goes on to ponder: "Is there any internal monitoring which we need. No one wants jail or censorship." Ultimately, investigating into the deeper meanings of performative practice, she notes "to practice: 1. Civil disruption – revolution. 2. Manipulation. 3. Coercion. 4. Imagery [??] 5. Shock." At the bottom of the page, she concludes: "Art is not an easy chair. Total commitment is when nothing from the outside gets in."²⁸ (fig. 8)

Barbara T. Smith's investigations into performance art can be seen within larger endeavors of early female and feminist performers to analyze the medium and document their work and, by doing so, to create a legacy of their contributions

27 Barbara T. Smith, handwritten note to Ethics and Economics of Performance Art panel, 1978, Barbara T. Smith papers, 2014.M.14, box 171, folder 1, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute.

28 Barbara T. Smith, handwritten note to Ethics and Economics of Performance Art panel, 1978, Barbara T. Smith papers, 2014.M.14, box 171, folder 1, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute.

for the future. The fund appeal letter for Womanspace gallery in Los Angeles, for example, stated that the gallery not only aimed at making "manifest what women's art is all about", but also to "house [women's artists'] archives, slides of their work, their biographies, as well as slides of biographies of women in the past" in order to preserve women's place in art history.²⁹ The notes to an exhibition initially called *We do not paint show* (later changed to *Performances*) at Womanspace in 1974 reveals the organizer's awareness of the difficulty that specifically performance art poses in that regard: "A month of happenings, performances, bodyworks, events, video and wall documentation of past performances. The exhibition committee sees this exhibition as a landmark in history as this is the first extensive show by women of work of this nature. The exhibit will serve to educate the public on this often obscured area and provide an enriched context for performing artists. The rationale for the documentation is to begin to build an archive of work in this genre. This will permit us to begin to formulate definitions of performance, to explore interrelationships between the works, and make women's contribution in this area manifest."³⁰ These theoretical and analytical endeavors, however, have yet to find their way into art historical scholarship as they, like so many other crucial aspects of performance art, remain buried in archival holdings. This is yet another testimony to the importance of artists' archives, which only recently start to receive the scholarly attention they deserve.³¹ Foregrounding archival material and documentation has become particularly important in feminist scholarship and



Fig. 8: Barbara T. Smith, handwritten note for "Ethics and Economies of Performance Art", 1978, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute (2014.M.14), Box 171, folder 1.

29 See Wilding 1977. Similarly, the Woman's Building devoted a segment of their activities to establishing a slide show with documentation of performances staged at the institute's galleries since its opening in 1973.

30 Handwritten exhibition description, Womanspace Gallery records, box 1, folder 46, Washington, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

31 Amelia Jones remains the main protagonist in arguing for the importance of artists' archives, especially in the realm of performance. See, for example Jones 1997, 11–18. Worth mentioning in the discourse of performance art documentation is also Phelan 2012, especially Amelia Jones' chapter on "Lost Bodies: Early 1970s Los Angeles Performance Art in History": 115–184; see also Jones 2012, especially Rebecca Schneider's essay "Performance Remains": 137–50. See also Gunhild and Rune 2013; Lambert-Beatty 2007, 94–102; Auslander 2006, 1–10; O'Dell 1997, 73–81; Büscher 2009; Foerschner and Rivenc 2018, 167–189.

curating as it interferes with art history as it has been written in numerous ways such as by negating the fetish of the finished artwork, which remains what is studied and exhibited, or by foregrounding the multi-layered processuality of artmaking. The case of performance art is no exception with the physical enactment of a piece (and possibly its visual documentation in film, video, or photographs) continuing to be the preferred modus for accessing and “understanding” performance whereas documentary material in the form of notes, drawings, scores, or sketches remains regarded as secondary. Amelia Jones has poignantly observed that this still dominant classification stems from a “tendency to think of the archive as something final and fixed, something with ‘dead’ pieces of past performances,” whereas the artist’s body is aligned with the “living, ‘authentic’, filled with meaning, fully ‘present’.” (Steinhäuser, Macdonald 2010, 11–18)³² Yet, as Barbara T. Smith’s archive shows, an artist’s papers, drawings, notes, sketches, research etc. constitute in themselves a “kind of material embodiment” that has to be regarded as inherent to an artist’s practice, especially in the realm of time-based work. (Jones 2012, 117) Smith’s archive is an invaluable resource for the reconstruction, interpretation, and contextualization of her ephemeral work, thus allowing for an important female artist to be inscribed into art history, or maybe for the representation of the artist as it happened so far in art historical discourse, to be broadened and complexified when previously unknown or understudied aspects of her work are taken into consideration.³³ In Smith’s case, her archive allows for deeper investigations into her relation to Feminism and for understanding Feminist thought as the idiosyncratic and personal issue that it is. Smith’s documentary material provides us with access to her artistic motivation and creative process and helps us understand the meaning of her work for her subjective reality and against its respective social and cultural climate instead of having to “invent” it retrospectively. (Jones 1997, 12)

In particular, Smith’s investigations into performance art reveal an astonishing awareness of the problematics and challenges of the medium, both for herself, but also for the larger art world and its audience. In critically interrogating the medium’s moral boundaries, resonance, and economic implications, Smith

Peggy Phelan in her *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. London: Routledge, 1993 has famously argued entirely against the possibility and necessity of performance documentation.

32 Jones also identifies the audience’s need for the notion of “presence” and ‘authenticity’ as underlying this prioritization of the visual.

33 Given Barbara T. Smith’s significance for the postwar art scene, especially the realm of performance, her work, with very few examples such as her Xerox books, for which the artist photocopied parts of her body, or her *Feed Me* performance, remains grossly underrepresented in scholarship and exhibitions. Publications and exhibitions include Klein 1999, 24–35; Noble 2018; Montano 2014; McCarthy 2013. A complete list of Smith’s exhibitions can be found on her gallery’s website, The BOX LA: <https://www.theboxla.com/artist.php?id=4614>, esp. “Who Are WE? Where Are We Going? What Are We Here For?/The Woman with the Mole,” exhibition New Gallery of the 18th Street Arts Complex, Santa Monica, May 14– June 28, 1994; *The 21st Century Odyssey Part II: The Performances of Barbara T. Smith*. Exhibition organized by Rebecca McGrew-Yule and Jennie Klein, edited by Marjorie Harth. Claremont, CA: Pomona College Museum of Art, 2005; McCarthy and Smith 2007.

provides an early theorization of a nascent and complicated form of art, one that has been (and continues to be) first and foremost connected to the notion of immediacy, liveness, and the body/embodiment. Her writings emphasize the medium’s practical and material components, shifting the focus from ephemerality and corporeality that dominates the interpretation of performance art, to its theoretical infrastructure, thus balancing out our currently still one-sided understanding. In addition, Smith continuously tests and questions the value of performance to negotiate her personal situation as a female and her emotional and physical relationships to men, thus complicating our understanding of the medium and its relationship to Feminism. Her works and writings thus give us an opportunity to rethink entrenched beliefs and narratives regarding performance and Feminist art and to critically reevaluate by whom and how they have been written. This can ultimately help us challenge the “historically bound, biased, and limited constructions of disciplinary knowledge,” (Steinhäuser, Macdonald 2010, 1) which in itself amounts to nothing else than a Feminist intervention into art history.

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**“FINDING A BODY”: PERFORMANS KAO PRAKSA I TEORIJA
U DELU BARBARE T. SMIT**

Apstrakt:

Rad analizira performativnu praksu Barbare T. Smit i autorkino teorijsko istraživanje performansa u kontekstu njenog iskustva žene i umetnice tokom 1960-ih i 1970-ih godina. Oslanjajući se na materijal iz ličnog arhiva umetnice, koji se nalazi u Istraživačkom institutu Geti, u radu su predstavljeni ključni elementi njene performativne prakse i njena veza sa drugom generacijom feminizma. Posebna pažnja je posvećena ispitivanju performansa kao polju ispitivanja ženstvenosti, seksualnosti, ali i fizičkih i emotivnih odnosa. Arhiv Barbare T. Smit otkriva umetničino analitičko bavljenje umetnošću performansa. Propitujući novu disciplinu i njene politike, proizvode, kao i ograničenja, Smitova pokazuje izvanrednu svest o kompleksnosti i idiosinkraziji umetnosti performansa i neobičnu odgovornost u umetničkom ispitivanju, teorijskom promišljanju i artikulisanju performansa.

Ključne reči:

performans, feministička umetnost, Barbara T. Smit, arhiv umetnika