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Barbara Cleveland: Bodies in Time

31 October 2016 | Lucy Stranger

She was a body paintbrush in Yves Klein's performance piece *Anthropométries* (1960), she dressed in drag and sang show songs with Mike Parr, and she inspired the recent name change of Sydney-based performance collective Brown Council to the Barbara Cleveland Institute (B.C. Institute) which comprises Diana Smith, Frances Barrett, Kate Blackmore and Kelly Doley. Barbara Cleveland was an enigma of Australian performance art history and is now 'remembered' by its most major players in the same way with a growing archive of storytelling and performances that borrow fact and spin a fiction about her life and persona.



If you are left joggng your memory to recall Cleveland, this is B.C. Institute's raison d'être. The group first encountered Barbara Cleveland and her work from the 1970s in an archive box at the Sydney College of the Arts in 2011. Immediately intrigued, they have since researched and reworked the memory of the artist as an ongoing project that addresses the gap in art history. Earlier this year the four performers engaged with 'the making of history' as part of the 20th Biennale of Sydney, collaborating with artists including Parr, and Richard Bell. Now, in a fourth instalment, Cleveland's work will be summoned in 'Bodies in Time', at the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW).

Commissioned to create a work in response to AGNSW's archives and collections, the significance of this moment was not lost to B.C. Institute, "for us placing Barbara Cleveland in the Gallery was the most ideal context, because what it does is situate the fictive nature of Barbara Cleveland within the performance of a museum", says Kelly Doley, speaking on behalf of the group. They undertook a residency in the archive section of the gallery, learning how collections are archived, hung and told to the viewer. "Having rooms as decades they tell a very linear story of art history. We as a group are playing around with these tropes of representation", explained Doley.

By engaging with the construction and display of collections in museums, 'Bodies in Time' aims to challenge the perception of archives and collections as objective spaces – completely absent of human bias.



Delving into the gallery archives B.C. Institute unearthed a surprise, “we found in there a simple instructional text piece by Barbara Cleveland. It was mixed up in Pat Larter’s box. That was our kind of starting point – okay she is actually in this archive, but she is buried and let’s try and re-enact this instructional work to some degree”, states Doley.

Working with contemporary dancer Angela Goh, ‘Bodies in Time’ is a recorded performance of Cleveland’s text to dance the history of performance art. “It is an instructional piece, a publication and a kind of score for the body, so we are going to insert that into the ‘1970s’ room in the AGNSW. It will be very much displayed as fiction as we are re-enacting it”, states Doley. Filmed and projected amongst the current collection, the work aims to disrupt the established art historical narrative, as Doley notes, “it is a poetic gesture to try and question what you are seeing and why.”

Rebuilding the memory of Barbara Cleveland has been a collaborative experience, and figures such as renown performance artist Parr and art historian Ann Marsh have created their own unique memories to add to Cleveland’s story. Whether true or fictitious, the shared memory of Cleveland overcomes the idea of an objective history or absolute truths. ‘Bodies in Time’ plays with fact and the role of archives and collections in creating it, as Doley sums up, “it is all fiction, those responses show what you can do if you have people from that time period, actually adopting the story. If a whole community of people say something and do something it is true.” From an archived box to a commissioned work within the AGNSW collection, Barbara Cleveland’s performance lives on.

[Art Gallery of New South Wales](#)

26 November, 2016 to 2 April, 2017

Sydney

Bodies in Time (video still), 2016, Barbara Cleveland, single channel HD video

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Viktoria Marinov Bequest Fund 2016

Copyright Barbara Cleveland with choreography by Angela Goh.

Photograph: Zan Wimberley

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