

# Look Magazine

## Art Gallery of New South Wales

### November-December 2016

## In Search of Barbara Cleveland



Sydney-based collective Barbara Cleveland explores the life and legacy of this elusive Australian artist. Interview by Anneke Jaspers.

The next AGNSW contemporary project, *Bodies in time*, will showcase a new acquisitive commission by Sydney-based artists Frances Barrett, Kelly Doley, Kate Blackmore and Diana Smith. The group has been collaborating since 2007 to make videos and live artworks that draw on the conventions and histories of both the visual and performing arts. Originally working under the name Brown Council, this project marks the collective's transition to a new entity, Barbara Cleveland.

**Anneke Jaspers:** Your project for AGNSW is the fourth in a series about Barbara Cleveland. Tell us a little about this elusive figure and how she came to feature in your work.

**Barbara Cleveland:** Since 2011 we have been developing a body of work about the performance artist, who practised primarily in Sydney in the 1970s before her untimely death in 1981. The original catalyst was Diana's discovery of an archive box at Sydney College of the Arts that was full of transcripts of Cleveland's performance lectures, a lock of her hair and some blurry photographs of her performing. We began to research her and found that she is relatively unknown in the history of Australian performance art. So we have since taken it upon ourselves to exhume Barbara's work and life to make it more available to others.

**AJ:** How would you characterise her output during the brief period she was active?

**BC:** Cleveland was one of the first Australian artists to merge feminist politics with performance art. Her work in the early 1970s primarily involved task-based actions on the body, or with the body: testing the physical limits of the body with different materials. In the late '70s and early '80s, she began to develop a series of

performance lectures, instructional texts and performance scores. These drew on the lineages of minimalism, conceptual art and post-object art practices in Australia. The lectures of Cleveland's that we found are meditations on performance but the language that she used is deliberately ambiguous. She left out key words so that when she delivered the performances the audience would have to work to try to uncover the meaning. We also found out recently that she was a contemporary of Mike Parr and did a number of performances at the notorious Inhibodress gallery in Sydney. According to Parr, Cleveland adopted a range of personas in her performances. For instance, as Barbara Johnson she performed a scarifying piece at Central Street gallery in 1973.



**AJ:** In part, the Cleveland cycle explores the relationship between 'live' actions and their material traces, as well as the legacy of ephemeral art forms that tend towards disappearance. What are some of the strategies you have used to re-animate Cleveland's work for audiences in the present?

**BC:** We have been doing this through reenacting a series of her performance lectures, as well as re-animating her works through a documentary we made in 2013 called *This is Barbara Cleveland*. Recently we made a work for the Biennale of Sydney called *Making History*, where we invited a range of artists, academics and critical thinkers to consider the work of Cleveland and how she might be remembered in the context of the Biennale. Mike Parr dressed as Cleveland and ate an apple (a nod to his own project cross-dressing as a bride), Eugene Choi re-enacted parts of Cleveland's performances intertwined with her own, and Anne Marsh gave a lecture on feminist performance art in Australia that inserted Cleveland. All this activity simultaneously seeks to redress and complicate her being 'written out' of Australian art history while asking what it means to remember, how we remember, and to trouble the notion that the archive is conclusive rather than selective.

**AJ:** This address to the archive also informs the new project for AGNSW. Can you talk about how working in a museum context will allow you to expand the narrative around her practice and your critique of 'the archive' as a kind of biased, partial apparatus?

**BC:** Working in the context of the museum allows us to address directly the ways in which collections are sorted, archived and displayed, and how historical narratives are constructed. Collections are, of course, never comprehensive, nor are they neutral; they continue to revolve around nations, art movements, masters and masterpieces. Museum collections, like the writing of art history, are dependent on a process of selection – a process that has historically tended to favour the work of white men. Indeed, women artists make up only 19 per cent of the collection at AGNSW. In many ways, this makes the museum a fruitful place to inhabit and reimagine, enabling us to critically reflect on the stories that may have been forgotten or omitted through various curatorial, archival and historical processes.

**AJ:** And how will this play out in *Bodies in Time*? What can audiences expect to see?

**BC:** The project will be displayed in the last room of the 20th century Australian galleries, which is known internally as 'the '70s room'. The work responds to the period that would normally be represented in this room, reflecting on the activity that shaped the Australian art scene at this time. It takes as its starting point one of Cleveland's performance scores called *Bodies in Time* (1980), which was discovered during a residency in the Gallery's archives. The score recalls fleeting, 'marginal' moments from art history – performances that survive as fragments of footage, grainy images and unstable memories. Taking Cleveland's lead, our new project will reactivate the score of *Bodies in Time* creating new relations and resonances with these historical works. The

score will be re-performed for the camera, and presented in the gallery as a video installation. There will also be a series of photographic images mounted on moveable screens, which will filter out into other rooms in the collection display.

Anneke Jaspers is curator, contemporary art.

**BARBARA CLEVELAND: BODIES IN TIME**

26 November 2016–2 April 2017

20th century Australian galleries

Images:

Barbara Cleveland

This is Barbara Cleveland

2013

Single channel HD video, sound,  
duration 16:42 (video stills).