

About Brain: For when all that was read was... so as not to be unknown

BY JUDITH BARRY



Memory, history, and how many relations between these two terms might be made visible is a recurring theme in Judith Barry's wide-ranging research-based art practice. Beginning with language-based performance works in the late 1970s and continuing through installations, exhibition designs, and graphic interventions, Barry has explored these issues in a variety of contexts. She transformed the "Carnegie International" exhibition into a "memory theater," created a miniature book that drew parallels between genre painting and 19th century pseudo sciences, and developed an interactive computer game that guesses how visitors to a digital museum might produce new forms of art experiences. These works are discussed in her recent catalog (*Judith Barry: Body Without Limits*, Domus Artium DA2, Salamanca, Spain 2009).

Commissioned by DOCUMENTA (13) to create a miniature *Guidebook* for "Brain", Barry discusses her approach to this project.



1. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, from an email exchange with Edoardo Bonaspetti at *Mousse* about “Brain,” April 3, 2012.

2. The *Guidebook* attempts to spatialize these concepts. Looking at the history of how images and writing have been contained within a form led me to seals as emblems, scrolls and codexes at the transition when the codex replaces the scroll, and illuminated manuscripts. This research further underscored that the visual architecture of the *Guidebook* must be nonhierarchical, with no beginning and no end, and that this structure would also need to be productive of an endless space in order to hold all the elements in “Brain” in some form of suspension. The *Guidebook* also needed its own internal support system, as it would not be able to rely on the linearity of the conventional book form to produce a structure of cohesion. Ultimately, the structure of the *Guidebook* was derived from “modular origami” with the aid of David Mitchell, an origami master, Ken Sailor and Project Projects, who also produced the graphic design; a form that indeed allows for many of the elements in the *Guidebook* to be suspended as well as providing an interior space. Functionally, the *Guidebook* is designed to be interactive. It is printed as a flat, two-dimensional object that must be assembled in order to be read. It can be read as it is folded, with much of the text disappearing into the structure of the folds, reminding me (and hopefully the reader) that while we may write so as to forget—in other words so we can empty our minds—books exist so we don’t have to remember.

3. Bruno Latour, “Where Is *res extensa*? An Anthropology of the Object,” lecture at the Offene Objekte conference, Berlin, 2010.

4. Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorion Cairns (London: Martinus Hijhoff, 1977): 83. “The universal depriving of acceptance, this ‘inhibiting’ or ‘putting out of play’ of all positions taken toward the already-given Objective world and, in the first place, all existential positions (those concerning being, illusion, possible being, being likely, probable, etc.),—or, as it is also called, this ‘phenomenological epoché’ and ‘parenthesizing’ of the Objective world—therefore does not leave us confronting nothing. On the contrary we gain possession of something by it; and what we (or, to speak more precisely, what I, the one who is meditating) acquire by it is my pure living, with all the pure subjective processes making this up, and everything in them, purely as meant in them: the universe of ‘phenonema’ in the... phenomenological sense.”

5. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993). Toward the end of this book, Latour discusses how we must rework our thinking to conceive of a “Parliament of Things” wherein natural phenomena, social phenomena, and the discourse about them are not seen as separate, to be studied by specialists, but as hybrids made and scrutinized by the public interaction of people, things, and concepts.

“It contains a number of artworks, objects, photographs, and documents, brought together as a programmatic and oneiric space, in lieu of a concept. They are held provisionally together in this “Brain” of *dOCUMENTA* (13) to indicate not a history, not an archive, but a set of elements that mark contradictory conditions and committed positions of being in and with the world—pitting ethics, desire, fear, love, hope, anger, outrage, and sadness against the conditions of hope, retreat, siege, and stage.”

When Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev told me about the concept for “Brain”—the statement above is what she related to my *Mousse* editor—it immediately triggered an intense visual image. It was as though I had been dropped into an infinite space where all the elements she was describing in “Brain” were suspended in an array. When I moved through the space of the array, it seemed endless and went on forever, and yet all of the objects seemed to be in extreme close-up. And I seemed to be in a place where time, too, was suspended, yet visible, in the space around each object. When I came close to one of the objects, I would suddenly be pulled into its orbit as its many histories came at me from a variety of different trajectories, each made visible as it unfolded.

I was immediately intrigued, as it reminded of a childhood fantasy of being inside time—as though there were an inside and an outside to time itself. This desire is, of course, a fantasy about omnipotence and ultimately is replaced by time as we know it. That said, it is also a fantasy about the potential for another kind of space, inside time, a speculative space with antecedents in quantum mechanics and physics. A place where all things can be together all at once within the imagination. Inside a moment where time is suspended, as if frozen, and the histories surrounding each object are still there.

I tried to keep the intensity of this experience in mind as I developed the *Guidebook* for “Brain.”² Albert Einstein’s famous quip that “Time exists so everything doesn’t happen all at once” is a reminder that all artifacts embody their different and competing histories. Yet these differences are often neutralized within a shared space, particularly within an exhibition. Hence, rather than presenting the *Guidebook* contiguously in the linear form of a book, where one word follows another, one page after another, all leading inevitably to The End, might it be possible to try to create a situation in which this *Guidebook* became a way for allowing these elements, in both their differences and their similarities, to be apprehended in some kind of dynamic balance.

What would happen if all time-embodied elements and their histories were suddenly available to us in all of their variety? And what if we could hold each of them discretely in our mind?

Bruno Latour remarks that “matter is as it is thought by the mind” and hence is constantly changing in significance, and, therefore, “The way we know (about objects) has been confused with the thing we know (about objects)” is important here.³ While Latour does not comment on whether it is possible to ever completely unlearn the things we know about an object, his statement is suggestive of three issues at stake for “Brain.”

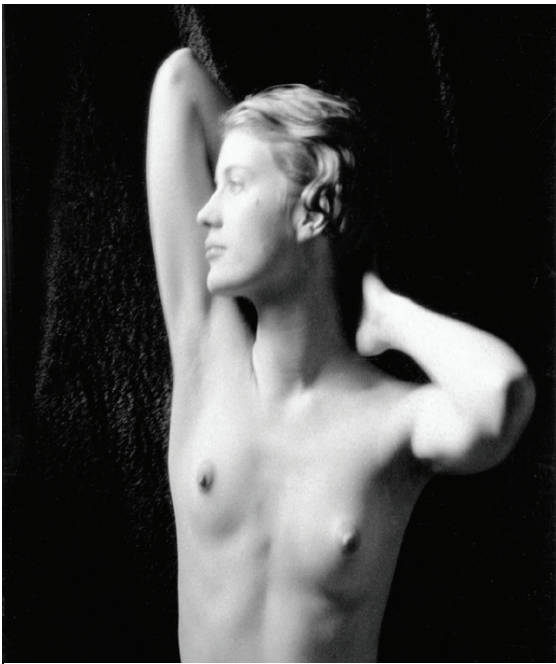
One is that after nearly 100 years of structuralist analysis beginning with Vladimir Propp, there are many ways of parsing a taxonomy of objects that might seem autonomous to the object (empirical), and yet simultaneously locate the object within its historical moment at the nexus of a construction of fictions. This is a condition that obtains throughout all the operations performed on history, including Jacques Derrida’s notion of deconstruction as already contained within whatever is under investigation, perhaps most pertinently for our purposes as explored in his *Mal d’archive*, whose French title more accurately conveys its meaning than the English translation, *Archive Fever*. These taxonomies, partial/incomplete/fictional are the traces that survive as the clues to be sifted into understanding. This incompleteness is not based on the empirical history of the object or its visual attributes. Rather, it is based on how the object is seen as representing its competing, specific histories at a moment *in time* as it strives toward homogeneity.

The second issue at stake for “Brain” is that every object (and its histories) also partakes of other simultaneous histories the instant that it (the object) comes into contact with a viewer, for the viewer irrevocably alters his or her understanding of the object at the moment of this encounter. That is the problem that Latour recognizes above. Even if there is an object without a viewer, there is the question regarding whether there can be any understanding about the object without some recognition on the part of a viewer that the object, while existing as a “thing-in-itself” (Kant), also comes into being at the moment the viewer encounters it, as in the “ego cogito” in Edmund Husserl’s *Cartesian Meditations* and the beginning of transcendental phenomenology.⁴

But each time an object encounters a viewer who brings to that object a different understanding about that object based on their understanding of the world, this new understanding of the object potentially adds to the understood authenticity of the object and ultimately to its aura, as this encounter with the object/artwork/document continues to circulate. Such that, following on from Latour, there is a complex “ecology of the object” in which every object becomes a hybrid made anew by these interactions.⁵

The third issue for “Brain” relates to Walter Benjamin’s comment that the authenticity of an object is the essence of all that is transmissible, from its beginning as an object to the history it has experienced, and which becomes known. This is what is at stake for Latour, I think, in the statement above, when he asks, “What is the difference between the way we know about an object and what we know about an object?” His approach places these two different orders of understanding in relation to each other. This question is central to the *Guidebook*.

Three of the original
vases that Giorgio Morandi
painted during the time
of World War II. and his
paintings from 1949
onward.



A double drawing on paper
of a Vietcong woman picking
up her hat by Vu Giang Hung
(1930–2011), an artist during the
American Vietnam War who often
portrayed the daily life of the
Vietcong.



Lee Miller

Eva Braun's perfume bottle
1945

A selection of bathroom articles
once belonging to Hitler's apart-
ment that Miller took away with
her when she visited the apart-
ment as an embedded photo



All images, unless otherwise specified –
For when all that was read was so as not
to be unknown, 2012. Courtesy: the artist,
Rosamund Felsen Gallery, Los Angeles and
Galerie Karin Sachs, Munich

Pages 58-59 – For when all that was read
was so as not to be unknown, PDF version,
2012. Courtesy: the artist, Rosamund
Felsen Gallery, Los Angeles and Galerie
Karin Sachs, Munich

6. Albert Einstein, *Relativity: The Special and General Theory* (Holt: New York, 1920). According to Einstein's theory of special relativity, the slowing of time is extreme near a black hole. From the viewpoint of an observer outside the black hole, time stops. For example, an object falling into the hole would appear frozen in time at the edge of the hole. According to Einstein's theory, time and space in a sense trade places inside the hole. Inside, the flow of time draws falling objects into its center. No force can stop this fall. Einstein's theory of gravity seems to predict that time itself is destroyed at the center of the hole and possibly comes to an abrupt end.

7. Christov-Bakargiev, Carolyn, *My Dear Friend*, letter dated October 25, 2010. Questions of personal and collective emancipation through art emerged in the process of making dOCUMENTA (13) by thinking through a number of composite ontologies that generate paradoxical conditions of contemporary life and artistic production. These include: participation and withdrawal as simultaneous modes of existence today; embodiment and disembodiment, and their mutual dependency; rootedness and homelessness, as a dual condition of subjecthood; proximity and distance, and their relativity; collapse and recovery, occurring simultaneously as well as in succession; the flood of uncontrolled information and the contemporaneous obsession with control and organization; translation and untranslatability, and their negotiation; inclusion and exclusion, and their connectedness; access and inaccessibility, and their coexistence; the obsolescence of a Eurocentric notion of art and the paradoxical emergence of practices related to that same notion in the world at large today; human life and other forms of life facing multi-species entangled histories; advanced science/technology and its alliance with ancient traditions; tangible and intangible heritage and their interconnectedness with contemporary culture; the specificity of being an artist and the nonspecificity of artistic practice.

8. Marcel Duchamp's original bottle rack was perhaps the first readymade. The original was thrown out by his sister, Suzanne, some time before it could be exhibited. (See: Cabanne, Pierre, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, New York, Da Capo Press, 1987). The artistic operations in Dada, Futurism, and Surrealism also combined disparate objects into new forms to produce hybrid meanings.

9. Hayden White is one of the first generation of historians to make use of literary theory to question the artificial, fictive, and anti-realist nature of historical narratives. While he is best known for *Metahistory* (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1973) and *The Content of Form* (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1990), he has increasingly applied his analytical skills across disciplinary boundaries, for instance to archaeology.

10. Ana Bezić is a professor of philosophy at University of Rijeka in Croatia.

11. See Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

12. See Carlo Ginzburg, *Threads and Traces* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

13. See Kaja Silverman, *Flesh of My Flesh* (Palo Alto, California: Stanford University Press, 2009).

Would the simultaneity of this experience of the elements in “Brain” as suspended *in time*, this encounter with these objects, now held discretely in our minds, be incomprehensible because it is tainted with what we already know about them, as Latour suggests? Would this also be impossible to comprehend, as some physicists argue, because time is unknowable and our commonsensical way of understanding the passage of time is only through our memories of our recent pasts? Hence, the argument that perhaps time does not really exist.⁶

Or, might this precipitate another way of coming to terms with these objects and their histories? Could we forestall thinking about this moment as one moment, and instead experience it as many simultaneous moments that are available to us all at once, where we might pick and choose among them, because perhaps inside time, there is only space?

Can you be *inside time* rather than just *in time*? If you are inside time, is time still passing? If time doesn't exist at the most fundamental level of reality, then what is time? And if Newton's, Einstein's, and quantum physics' laws all work equally well if time runs forward or backward, then why is time a seemingly one-way, forward process? Time becomes defined by what our clocks measure, but the clocks don't keep time; nothing does. And do we ever see time? Or do we just observe physical variables as a function of other physical variables and use time to represent these variables as relationships?

Is this some kind of ontological black hole where time indeed doesn't stop, but in fact goes backward and from which no matter can return—a condition speculated as part of the current understanding of how matter functions within black holes? And isn't this one of the conditions that seemingly sets our epoch apart from the others that have come before?

Of course there are many other ways to think about these objects/artworks/documents in “Brain” than as suspended in time. And about the relationships objects might have with their empirical, memorial, and premodern histories. Here is where the question of historical methodology might be one path among many through this material. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev has discussed the operational methodology of dOCUMENTA (13) as a series of what might be considered paradoxical conundrums, which in turn might be seen to encapsulate certain properties.⁷ These statements seem to underpin the selection of elements included in “Brain.” Paradoxes are by definition notoriously slippery constructs to give form to or even to define, and yet arguably the methodology of the paradox has been in use as an artistic operation since the introduction of the readymade in the early 20th century.⁸

What is “Brain” if not a readymade of a different order? Rather than reprising this in art historical terms, I want to mention a few nodes of contemporary thought that might suggest alternative paths through this material, and through the operational space of the *Guidebook*.

- HAYDEN WHITE's work on assemblage as an archaeology of the readymade solely as a material object, rather than a discursive one, which is then productive of ways to make “a new thing by putting together congeries of older ones.”⁹

- ANA BEŽIĆ's notion that assemblage in archaeology must be considered as the result of assembling people and things as objects and processes traced through continual interactions as



unique events in time, rather than being defined as in stasis, as classifications of inert artifacts.¹⁰

- MICHEL DE CERTEAU's concept of “heterologies” as a method for exploring the collision of human/spatial operations as ruptures within prevailing institutional constraints.¹¹

- CARLO GINZBURG's use of anomalies, rather than norms, for his investigations of what he terms “microhistory” alongside the value he assigns to the role of clues and speculative logic, most recently in relation to contemporary politics.¹²

- KAJA SILVERMAN's discussion of analogy and her exploration of how this might be productive of a different understanding of representation whereby similarity is not seen as sameness, and difference does not automatically translate into opposition.¹³