THE COMMON GUILD
Visual arts: Projects / Events / Exhibitions

Photo by Ruth Clark

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COMMENTARIES

Robert Barry

4 September – 6 November 2010

'Words and Music'

Given that his installation at The Common Guild was constructed almost entirely from words, it is notable that Robert Barry has consistently disavowed any relationship his artwork might hold to the conventions of either poetry or literature. To establish an understanding of what values could conceivably replace this literary framing of the written word, an attempt must be made to contextualise Barry's practice in relation to theories emerging from other disciplines in the 1960s. The contextualisation I propose draws in particular on two terms Barry has employed in the description of his own work: that of the 'field' and the 'receiver'. It is through this analysis that the dramatic repositioning of the viewer's role in relation to an artwork put forward by such a practice might be fully appreciated. Situated in the context of a gallery space, we must further consider what separates the act of looking, a discourse concerning itself with phenomenological perception, from that of reading, a linguistic interpretation.

Established before, and remaining long after Barry's employment of actual electromagnetic and radioactive fields in his practice, the notion that an artwork emits a localised, invisible energy around itself is perhaps the single most enduring motif in his work. This should not be regarded as having metaphysical connotations, but rather as a form of discursive energy. It implies that an artwork's meaning is formed outwith the object itself, in the 'field' it radiates. In his 1962 book *The Open Work*, Umberto Eco offers the following thought:

"The notion of a 'field' is provided by physics and implies a revised vision of the classic relationship posited between a cause and an effect as a rigid one-directional system."[1]

Borrowing this interpretation, the object's function shifts from directly delivering meaning to articulating a proposed situation or body of information, something which occurs in the negative space around it. Whether manifest as a group of small, interrelated canvases, or as a statement referring to a cognitive state inaccessible to the viewer (for example, something which is unknown to me but works upon me), this approach actively involves the audience in a manner that disrupts what Eco saw as the "univocal" or privileged position of the author.

Equally thought provoking is Barry's reference to his proposed audience as a group of 'receivers'. This designation has a specific resonance with the descriptions of transmitted meaning put forward in early essays on information theory. In laying the foundations for the shift in the perception of "information" from a qualitative to quantitative term that would take such firm hold in the later half of the twentieth century, Claude Shannon remarked:

"The fundamental problem of communication is that of reproducing at one point, either exactly or approximately, a message selected at another point."[2]

It seems that Barry has always held an innate understanding of how fragile the act of artistic communication is. Resigning himself to the mutability of the message reaching his receivers he has instead set himself the task of essaying its outermost possibilities. It seems important to remind ourselves that, with this approach, comes an increased responsibility to the viewer, as it is we the receivers who complete this circuit.

Neil Clements is an artist based in Glasgow.

1. Umberto Eco, *The Open Work* (trans. Anna Cancogni), Cambridge MA, 1989, p. 14.

2. Claude Shannon and W. Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*, Urbana IL, 1949.