



Free Radical Aesthetics: Barbara T. Smith's *Birthdaze*

By Juli Carson

*Radicals have always been a minority within the minority of the left. Unlike liberals, they never feel part of the existing order and are invariably critical of it... The radical is the perpetual outsider, the odd man (or woman) out, constantly critical of the power structure and of things as they are.*¹

— Carey McWilliams

What is a radical? Today you can't escape the accusation – *you're radical!* Politicians and pundits tirelessly volley the charge across the divide separating their ideological camps. This defines the *Zeitgeist* of a renewed culture war, one in which the Left and Right are both products and producers of their polarized positions. Sadly, an endless tango of dialectic reversals ensues, a situation that secures the status quo. But what if a "radical" were perceived as a game *stopper* rather than a game *changer*? What if it denoted a person who refused to play the game on its established terms? We might then have a *free radical*, one that would roam the body politic (or aesthetic), breaking down structures that shore up conventional, dialectical thought. It's a challenging notion for those who tenaciously hold onto oppositional politics, in that the free radical would transgress all established polarities, be it male/female, mental/emotional, art/life and so on. There's a history of artists who've taken up this proposition, beginning with Georges Bataille whose notion of the *formless* was "a term serving to declassify." Knocking all categories off their pedestals, that which the formless designates "gets crushed like a spider or an earthworm."² While Bataille devised his theory in the 20s and 30s, we might consider Barbara T. Smith – a free radical *par excellence* among Southern California performance artists – a fellow traveler. What follows is a case study of free radical aesthetics exemplified by Smith's *Birthdaze*, a performance that took place at Tortue Gallery in Santa Monica on July 17, 1981.

Performed on the occasion of her 50th Birthday, *Birthdaze* presents three *mises-en-scène* of Smith's life – housewife, rebel, spiritualist – each defined by a specific discursive formation – feminine mystique, aesthetic revolt and transcendentalism. As Smith describes it: "The performance was structured in three parts: Part 1 and 2 were performed in the center of a patio area outside the gallery with the audience surrounding the piece. Part 3 was performed in an anteroom off the main gallery, with a translucent veil between the audience and performers. Part 1 was intended as a humorous metaphor of my (and many women's) early adulthood. Part 2 was intended as an abstract representation of a major drama which shadows the lives of



most men and women. Part 3 was a ritual which suggested a different way for men and women to relate to each other.³ To enter the work is thus to journey through three worlds – or historical epistemes – where the category of gender is continually interrogated. That said, if *Birthdaze* has a narrative arc, the final "reconciliation" scene – a Tantric ceremony involving ritual intercourse between Smith and Victor Henderson⁴ – *suspends* the dialectic staged by the performance's first two parts. For ultimately, the male/female dichotomy presented by *Birthdaze* emphasizes the " / " *between* gender positions – a *oneness* that isn't a complementary reconciliation of "both this *and* that" but, rather, a formless state of being "*neither one nor the other.*"

Unlike many performances, this was no overnight affair. The road to *Birthdaze* began in Pasadena, in the 1950s. Married in 1951 to a financially dependable husband and living in an affluent Southern Californian community – at 20 years of age – Smith personified the housewife Betty Friedan would write about a decade later. In *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan articulates the source of "The Problem That Has No Name" – that feeling of malaise endemic to the so-called happy homemaker:

*Over and over women heard in voices of tradition... that they could desire no greater destiny than to glory in their own femininity. Experts told them how to breastfeed children and handle their toilet training, how to cope with sibling rivalry and adolescent rebellion; how to buy a dishwasher, bake bread, cook gourmet snails, and how to build a swimming pool with their own hands; how to dress, look, and act more feminine and make marriage more exciting... They were taught to pity the neurotic, unfeminine, unhappy women who wanted to be poets or physicists.*⁵

Indeed, the 50s were characterized by the societal campaign to return women from the factories they had worked in during WWII, encouraging them to marry younger with homemaking as their primary career goal. By the end of the 1950s, the average marriage age had dropped to 20 with 14 million girls engaged by 17.⁶ Slowly, but surely, the desperate realization set in amongst those women who'd sacrificed their education for homemaking: *No matter how hard I try, I will never have my husband's life.* A mass sense of cultural imprisonment settled in, a sentiment that drove Friedan and others to launch the modern American feminist movement, which influenced Smith's early radicalization in the 60s.

Upon disinheriting the happy homemaker myth, Smith's artistic development was swift. In 1967, she simultaneously separated from her husband; sold her first artwork; traveled to New York, where she met Leo Castelli and Kasper König; and taught at Westridge School and met Allan Kaprow who became a close friend. In 1969, Smith – 38 and newly divorced – enrolled



in UCI's new MFA program along with Nancy Buchanan and Chris Burden. It was there that Smith, Buchanan, Burden and others independently founded F-Space, a non-commercial Gallery in Santa Ana that hosted many seminal performances including Burden's infamous *Shoot* (1971). With her life as a housewife in the rear-view mirror, Smith was now entering the heart of the California avant-garde as a major player. In 1972, upon graduating from UCI, she engaged in a number of disparate practices from feminist politics and avant-gardist performance tactics, to the study of Buddhism, science and philosophy. However, Smith's avant-garde interrogation of women's erotic representation in visual culture confused some feminists. For instance, in *Feed Me*⁷ a naked Smith, residing in a boudoir environment, invited individuals to enter one at a time to offer her something – wine, cheese, massage, books, marijuana, conversation etc. – to which Smith could either accept or refuse. In an interview with Moira Roth, Smith noted: "I heard afterwards that there were... women [who] didn't like it because they felt it was compromising to women's liberation."⁸ What early critics failed to understand about Smith's performances was her tenacious attempt to *embrace* polarities, heterogeneously, rather than *wage* them, ideologically. Content to occupy that space, as neither one *nor* the other, the free radical in Smith surfaced in the early 70s and continued to grow throughout the decade.

Smith's formless sensibility culminated in *Birthdaze*, where her personal Tantric experience most forcefully triangulated the avant-garde/feminist dialectic and, by association, the male/female sexual relation. The dialectic was on display through the participation of devoted avant-gardists Kim Jones, Paul McCarthy and Kaprow, with founding feminists Buchanan, Linda Burnham, Sue Maberry and Cheri Gaulke in attendance. Dick Kilgroe, motorcycle racer and Smith's ex-lover, along with Henderson, Smith's Tantric counterpart, provided a distancing point from the avant-garde/feminist dialectic. The participants were each given a "role" to play. But since they had also been participants in Smith's real-life radicalization, they were, in fact, playing *themselves* playing that role. As a result, the art/life dialectic was transgressed.

For instance, in Part I Smith enters wearing a blonde wig, purple rayon dress and high-heeled shoes and approaches a table of hats and gloves evocative of the happy homemaker era. Meanwhile, McCarthy and Jones enter as "two troll-like, street-bum shamanistic men" – their art personas – grunting and pawing after Smith. Smith, in turn, tries to ignore their advances while putting on the different hats and gloves. But it is to no avail, and she flees.

Cover: Barbara T. Smith, *Birthdaze*, Tortue Gallery, 1981
Interior (Left to Right): *Birthdaze*, Part 1, 2 & 3
Images courtesy of the artist and The Box, Los Angeles
Photographer: Daniel Joseph Martinez

In Part II Smith re-enters the scene on the front of a motorcycle driven by Kilgroe. With hair cut short, Smith wears Levis jeans, a man's undershirt and leather jacket – signifiers of women's liberation. Over speakers, male voices testify – through starts and stutters – their frightful experiences about Viet Nam. While Kilgroe and Smith passionately embrace, Kaprow watches center stage, the audience from their seats. An emotional tug of war ensues between Smith's desire for Kilgroe – a sign of rebellious virility– and her love for Kaprow – a sign of patriarchal understanding. Between these poles Smith is at once, irreconcilably, the whore *and* the virgin. But in art, as in life, it's a duality that goes nowhere. And since neither separation nor reconciliation is possible, another route is necessary.

If Part I represented Smith's pre-feminist life in Pasadena and Part II the normative gender roles that remained within the art scene and women's liberation, then Part III attempted to transcend the male/female dialectic through a Tantric sexual ritual. Tantra was introduced to an Anglophone audience, in 1967, through Ajit Mookerjee's illustrated books on the subject.⁹ Its key tenet – *as above, so below* – maintains that all that exists in the universe must also exist in the individual body. For the practitioner, then, spiritual transcendence doesn't come from a *withdrawal* from the world but from the unification of polar opposites *within* it. From one-ness we are born into this divided world, Tantric tradition asserts, and it is to this one-ness we seek to return. Notably, this one-ness is not me *or* the other. It is a transcendence of the very opposition, intended not "as a code for daily living, but rather as a metaphor of a truth for the aspirant to meditate on, or on occasion, to perform with the limits of a ritual enactment."¹⁰

Birthdaze was one such ritual enactment attempting to annul the division not only of self and other, but also of art and life. Part III – titled *As Above, So Below* – is thus a double meditation on transcendence. The sexual proposition initiated by Smith and Henderson's ritual act is self-evident, particularly in the context of the *mises-en-scène* that proceed it. What's less evident is the avant-garde proposition performatively made by the scene as Smith laid it out. The couple, surrounded by chanters and various Tantric accoutrements, engages in the ritual sex act. Above them a video monitor plays a tape representing the same ritual – the same persons, objects, food and so forth (as above so below) – which dissolves the line between *here the art, there the fact*. Which is which? It's hard to tell. There's a reality to the videotape and a representational quality to the performance. Subsequently, in ritual and reality, in art and in fact, Smith and Henderson – as images and people – momentarily correspond.

But as practitioners attest, Tantric rituals are not a code for life but an *aspiration* upon which to mediate. Could a similar aspirational claim be made for art? Unlike Tantric rituals that ostensibly provide a sense of one-ness for its practitioners, in art such correspondence can be unsettling because when art and life begin to converge – when representations of sex and/or violence blur with reality – the viewer's mastery over his or her world-view is thrown into doubt. In an early defense of McCarthy's performances, where there's similar confusion as to whether one is seeing *actual* violence or merely its representation, Smith maintains the generative potential of this dilemma:

The art context provides areas and ways for the artist to be and do things which could never be believed or permitted in ordinary life. It is precisely this dilemma which often makes for the viewer's discomfort with some performance art, and created a persistent desire to continue doing performance on the part of the artist.¹¹

Indeed, we hear this discomfort in the interviews Smith conducted with audience members after *Birthdaze*. But there were also attendant moments

of self-reflection, when interviewees commented on the limitations of their conventional sensibilities. One interviewee commented: "The sexuality in the piece was disturbing to me because of a difficult situation in my love life at the time. I was in love with a man who would not have sexual intercourse with me." And ultimately that's the point of Smith's performances. Since critical self-reflection upon one's fantasies doesn't often happen in life – unless one's in psychoanalysis – art can be a catalyst for such interrogation. Specifically, art that puts something in place where it is unexpected refuses to provide a Platonic sanctuary from the realities of the world – be it preemptive wars abroad, the struggle for sexual equality or the endless defense of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, all of which dominate the American cultural landscape at the moment. Times being as turbulent today as they were when Smith originally performed *Birthdaze*, her daringness to put something where it "should not be" can and *should* inspire a younger generation of artists and critics. Poignantly, the words Smith used to defend McCarthy are instructive for contemporary viewers of *Birthdaze*: "Rather than saying [the artist] is merely being self-expressive...it would be better to honor the mutual journey that performer and audience take together which can be realized in perhaps no other way concretely."¹² This is the legacy of Barbara T. Smith's free radical aesthetics.

- 1 Carey McWilliams, *Fool's Paradise: A Carey McWilliam's Reader*, (Santa Clara: Santa Clara University, 2001), pp. 259-160.
- 2 Georges Bataille, *Encyclopaedia Acephalica*, (London: Atlas Press, 1995), pp. 53-54.
- 3 Barbara T. Smith, "Birthdaze," *High Performance*, Los Angeles, Fall, 1981.
- 4 Victor Henderson, a painter, was a founder of LA Art Squad Mural Group.
- 5 Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, excerpted in *Feminism in Our Time*, ed. Miriam Schneir, (New York: Vintage, 1994), p. 90.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Performed in the series *All Night Sculptures* at Tom Marioni's Museum of Conceptual Art in 1973.
- 8 *Performance Anthology: A Source Book for a Decade of California Performance Art*, (San Francisco: Contemporary Arts Press, 1980), p. 118.
- 9 See: Daniel Benveniste, "Tantric Art and the Primal Scene," *The San Francisco Jung Institute Library Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (Autumn 1990).
- 10 Ibid, p. 53.
- 11 Barbara T. Smith, "Paul McCarthy," *LAICA Journal*, Los Angeles, Jan-Feb, 1979.
- 12 Ibid.

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