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HER OWN RISK

Michael Ned Holte on Barbara T. Smith's "The Way to Be"



Spread from Barbara T. Smith's *Coffin: Die Cut, Rick Hard-Bound*, 1966-67, Xeroxes, spiral bound, 11 1/4 × 17 3/4". From the series "Coffin," 1966-67.

THE MOST STARTLING SIGHT the viewer encounters in “The Way to Be,” Barbara T. Smith’s retrospective at the Getty Center in Los Angeles, is a hulking Xerox 914 copy machine, looking impossibly new despite its obvious 1960s vintage. Designed to revolutionize the modern office, the 914 became an unlikely tool for artistic production and personal revolution when Smith leased one in 1966, plopping it in the living room of her conventional middle-class home in Pasadena, California. Smith was surely among the first artists to explore the possibilities of this technology, if not the first; the work she made with the 914 predates Seth Siegelaub’s *Xerox Book*, a defining demonstration of Conceptual-art methodology, by nearly three years. In Smith’s lively 2023 memoir, also titled *The Way to Be*, we learn that her acquisition of the copier followed a failed attempt to engage the famed Los Angeles lithography studio Gemini G.E.L. We also learn that Smith used the machine to document her immediate world amid a rapidly crumbling marriage: Soon, she would separate from her husband, and two of her three children would go to live with their father. This harrowing personal narrative is largely elided in the exhibition, but it propels the memoir and provides a sense of the very real stakes of Smith’s risky gambit as an artist ambitiously defying gendered expectations and social conventions.

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Smith’s approach to the new medium of photocopying is inherently experimental, yet reveals a sense of her immediate fluency in and attunement to a remarkable range of possibilities. Images of her children feature prominently in her hand-bound folios, or “coffins,” as she called them—a provocative title from the daughter of a mortician. There is also playful, serialized material exploration in Xerox works like *Rice and Object*, 1965–66, which suggests a lineage with Man Ray’s concrete rayographs, as well as frankly erotic self-portraiture, all emphasizing the physicality of the flatbed scanner. Defying the

association of mechanical reproduction with a cool, corporate affect, Smith's Xerox works are unlikely appeals to corporeal sensuality and feeling.

From these early works emerge at least two compelling thematic strands that thread through the exhibition, which was organized by Glenn Phillips and Pietro Rigolo and draws heavily from the artist's archives, held by the Getty Research Institute. First, there's Smith's eager embrace of technology, often leading to works without any obvious precedent. Take her *Field Piece*, 1968–72, an environmental installation of 180 towering fiberglass blades, all fitted with lightbulbs and interconnected with programmable electronics, the whole thing loosely resembling a giant field of grass. What can now be understood as a crucial work in the development of the California Light and Space movement was first shown in part at F-Space in Santa Ana in June 1971 but only exhibited in its full glory briefly, first at Cirrus Gallery in Los Angeles in September 1971 and the following year at the Long Beach Museum of Art. Its reception was mixed, and many of its blades have been damaged through vandalism, revelry, or neglect. Only sixteen remain intact. On loan from the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, they have been displayed backed by mirrors, intimating the vast space they once occupied and hinting at the social possibilities of the larger field: A nearby video reveals the prelapsarian vibe of the installation as initially exhibited, with the artist and her friends frolicking naked amid the fiberglass flora.

A related proposal for Experiments in Art and Technology's Osaka Pavilion, 1970—represented here as a diagrammatic drawing—was rejected. Smith was also overlooked for Maurice Tuchman's 1967–71 Art and Technology program at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; the misogyny of that program has long been evident. In the face of such rejections and exclusions, Smith thrived by defining the rules of engagement rather than waiting for permission or external validation, often training her attention inward instead.

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The second strand that runs through the exhibition is a perpetual search for nourishment, both personal and professional, with food often serving as a metaphorical or literal vehicle. *Visualization of a Table Setting from "Ritual Meal,"* 2023, is a tabletop arrangement of serving ware, medical-lab equipment, art supplies (oil sticks in rainbow hues), and a projector casting cosmic imagery on the ceiling. Beyond the nearly abstract photograph of open-heart surgery mounted on the wall, there's something oddly sterile about the presentation, given the apparent chaos of *Ritual Meal*, the 1969 performance on which *Visualization* is based. At the Getty, the exuberant chaos of this Happening-like feast is conveyed by Smith's Rube Goldberg-esque preparatory drawings and a chart of the many choreographed courses.

The documentary material for *Feed Me*, 1973, an important if controversial performance at Tom Marioni's Museum of Conceptual Art, is spare: a black-and-white photograph of the nude artist taken in the bathroom where the performance took place, a journal of Smith's encounters with viewer-participants (mostly men), and a present-day video of the artist recalling the work. Over the course of the night, the artist received one stranger at a time, in hopes of being fed—with wine, food, massage oil, marijuana, conversation. Several encounters were sexual. Some critics have expressed discomfort with the work, but Smith maintains that she was always in control of the situation.



Barbara T. Smith, *The Way to Be*, 1972. Performance view, Gold Bluffs Beach, Oregon, September 1972. Barbara T. Smith. Photo: Michael Kelley and Ernie Adams.

Smith's practice, then and still—the artist is ninety-one years old—is decidedly individualistic and determinedly spiritual, setting the artist apart from many of her more explicitly political feminist peers and collaborators, including Nancy Buchanan, Judy Chicago, and Suzanne Lacy. Earnest spirituality likewise separated her from male peers like Chris Burden, Allan Kaprow, and Paul McCarthy. In Smith's memoir, she cites such shamanistic European figures as Joseph Beuys and Hermann Nitsch as significant models. But Kaprow, a mentor of sorts and an occasional lover who appears (looking simultaneously pained and bemused) in *Birthdaze*, 1981, Smith's audacious performance in celebration of her fiftieth birthday, exemplifies a useful if less spectacle-driven paradigm. "Doing Life, consciously, was a compelling notion to me," he notes in his 1979 essay "Performing Life." "When you do life consciously, however, life becomes pretty strange."

While Kaprow's version of "performing life" could be analytical, even stiff, Smith's rendition tends to be strange, indeed, but also highly charged—spiritually, sexually, or otherwise. If the latter's works are sometimes procedurally complicated or result in messy social relations, such is the nature of "doing life" as forthrightly as possible. *The Way to Be*, the 1972 performance for which the show and memoir are named, traces a trip Smith took from San Francisco to Seattle, wearing all white with half of her face painted red. Beyond this costume, and the artist's decision not to speak during the journey, the complexity of the performance results from its many aleatory encounters. Two photographers enlisted to document the work reveal Smith in a wide variety of landscapes and social settings, emphasizing the unpredictability of the endeavor while inevitably becoming part of its unfolding narrative.

What was challenging about Smith's work for the artist herself—testing personal limits and social boundaries—presents a very different challenge for its audience, precisely because her work is primarily focused on self-transformation: The viewer's access to those changes is inherently restricted. Despite her considerable aesthetic chops—especially evident here in the Xerox coffins, *Field Piece*, and the show's one example of Smith's exquisite series of Minimalist-era "Black Glass Paintings," 1965–66—form is usually secondary to whatever is happening inside the artist in the work's making. "In my performances I am not interested so much in a finished product or how entertaining this might be," Smith notes in a wall-filling text accompanying *Birthdaze*. "I leave the piece open until the last possible moment and work mostly on the transformation occurring [*sic*] so that all those who participate can use the piece as a tool or vehicle for their own realizations or transformation."



Barbara T. Smith, *Field Piece* (detail), 1968–72, colored fiberglass resin, Ethafoam, plywood, lightbulbs, speakers, electronics. Installation view, Long Beach Museum of Art, California, 1972.

Since almost the beginning, Smith’s quest has had little to do with climbing the perceived (and overwhelmingly patriarchal) ladder of art history. Perhaps this is why it’s taken so long for an artist so central to the development of West Coast art and many of its social circles to gain the kind of recognition demonstrated by this retrospective, her first since a 2005 exhibition at Pomona College Museum of Art (now the Benton Museum) documenting her major performances. A second, more comprehensive survey will arrive at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, this fall. In our risk-averse moment, nearly sixty years after Smith xeroxed herself in an act of liberation, her work still suggestively offers a model for personal revolution for those willing to look inward and embrace the unknown, as she has for the past six decades.

“Barbara T. Smith: The Way to Be” is on view at the Getty Center, Los Angeles, through July 16.

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