

**A SET OF VERBS**

**VISIONS AND DREAMS**

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Irene Barberis





**ESSAY**

**Float Knots:**

**Irene Barberis**

Genesis 2:7 *And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.*

The notion of breath is paramount in Irene Barberis' work. First breath. Last breath. She fills her work with her body: her breath. In *float knot* 2005 Barberis breaths volume into oversized, translucent, brightly coloured cuboids. Primarily no mechanical devices are employed but rather the body supplies both the material and the physical means for inflating the work. Barberis pushes air about, and the object, part synthetic part organic, comes into existence. float knot is a big, malleable form, many times human scale that Barberis physically battles into existence in an exhausting marathon of inflating/making where she forces the long, inflated cuboids into knots. *float knot* is a soft abstract shape where humanity is implied not only in the very human breath from which it is formed, but also in the form of the knot itself that suggests fragments of DNA.

Barberis tests not only her sculptural practice but also her body in the creation of *float knot* 2005. Tremendous physical stamina and force are required to generate the work. The process begins relatively effortlessly with Barberis breathing into the plastic. She blows, puffs, pushes, huffs, forces, wheezes, pants, gasps, her breath catches and, finally, she has no breath left to offer the work. float knot embodies the artist's body that has pushed through its own parameters, and now exists, many times expanded and transformed, within the inflated *float knot*.

The performative space suggested by the process of inflating *float knot* has been utilised by Barberis to make a sound work that accompanies *slow release* 2005. The sound of the artist inflating the work is suggestive of the body in its many manifestations. The soft, deep breathing of the sleeper, the excited sexual body, the hurt body, the sobbing body, the sick body, the body giving birth and the body dying are all present in Barberis' breathing. The physicality of the body, the life force, is powerfully present in the minimalist, highly aesthetic, invisible and subtle substance of the breath. In *float knot* Barberis 'limits' the breath to the parameters of the plastic membrane, the juncture between inside and outside is inscribed as a site where, in this case, the organic and inorganic join. 1

Breathing and the absence of breath are central to one of the most poignant scenes in the recent Australian film Japanese Story (2003) where Sandy Edwards (Toni Colette) wrestles to move the lifeless, breathless, body of Hiromitsu Tachibana (Gotaro Tsunashim) after a swimming accident. It is a powerful image - the lifeless body being moved by the living without the paraphernalia of the medical, clinical, scientific or mortuary apparatus associated with the dead. Edwards lifts and wrangles Tachibana's body and the intimacy of their sexual connection is inferred through the uncannily similar gestures and sounds that Edwards makes as she moves his heavy, lifeless body. She gasps and wheezes, sobs and moans - her own breath is powerfully present in the absence of his: his silence. Barberis grapples bodily with the inflated plastic form to make *float knot*. She engages physically with the long cuboid breath-filled forms that are so intimately associated with her own body. These forms are a 'soft' reflection of hard edge abstraction that are worked through a haptic process where she punches, knocks and kneads them into knots. The work literally punches down the language of minimalism. The work, rather than being rigid and impenetrable, takes on the opposite properties and is permeable, changeable and animated. The *float knots* are transparent and lively; filled with Barberis' breath and at the mercy of the air outside they have a vulnerable, changeable quality. The work shifts within the exhibition space, having its own life and finding its balance and place. For Barberis this work signifies a direction towards the Christian Apocalypse, towards the end: the end of breath. Contained within *float knot* are ribbons of written text from The Revelation to John describing, through a highly symbolic language, a complex series of visions and revelations.2 For Barberis the notion of the end of time, man's time, is paramount to the work. She understands the Apocalypse as a lifting of the veil where a specific knowledge is revealed.3 The Apocalypse can be seen to be an inversion of time and whilst in popular culture the Apocalypse is associated with the end of time, a mythical ending, for Christians it is about the beginning of a new time. Visions and dreams are important to Barberis. Often maligned in our so-called rational society, they are a vehicle into a different kind of consciousness and, particularly, into the spiritual. Whilst an interest in The Revelation to John may appear esoteric outside the domain of science-fiction aficionados and biblical scholars, for Barberis it is integral to her practice with the imagery suggested, in particular the gold and glass city of the New Jerusalem, influencing the making of works such as *grow* 2005.

*grow* is a large, sprawling work that begins on the floor with a series of open ended perspex cubes that cite Sol Lewitt's white wood open ended cube system. *grow* is about order and chaos. The clear perspex cubes are placed on the floor on white, high gloss perspex squares. The rods and tubes 'grow' upwards, creeping and climbing up to the ceiling, increasingly becoming more erratic and unpredictable. The white perspex floor grids suggest an arithmetical preciseness and clarity whilst the irregular growth of the tubes and connecting system, as the work moves upwards, speaks of patterns and the quest for order and systems associated with mathematics: order within apparent disorder, the leap from the unknown to the known.

The fluorescent pink 'connectors' in *grow* that join the perspex tubes are hand cast in the studio and, whilst initially appearing mass produced, suggest the process of making through the use of the residue of the casting process to produce large, glossy 'splats'. The amoeba-like shapes generated are shiny accumulations of residue - the 'end' product of the 'end' product of the casting process. The pigmentation in some of the resin 'splats' has separated and, in a palette of pinks and whites, suggests the fluids and cells of the body. The tubes and connectors that make up grow suggest a vulnerable body through their hospital-apparatus appearance. Left over casting fluid is also used by Barberis to generate text that is syringed out in a soft, flowing line.

The language of Barberis' work is abstract but textual, employing a vocabulary of words sourced from biblical texts. In *grow* 2005 the text, printed out on raised, sticky back tape, goes through the clear perspex tubes but is not contained by them - the text spills out. Cited from Revelation the text reads; 'I saw'. 'I heard', 'I opened my eyes', 'I turned', 'I fell', 'I did'. *grow* speaks of a brain system where words form, fragments of thought are juxtaposed against other thoughts and, often, banal imagery/objects. In *grow* words become apparent and then recede, thin lines of illuminated wires form words that connect in a lyrical, cursive hand. Words are formed in light. The cursive text implies a connecting of words and phrases where they are perceived not only in a linear relationship to each other but also, through the erratic building that forms grow, multiple, hybrid connections.

In *grow* Barberis uses the notion of the game, and specifically an 18th Century board game that was used as a mnemonic device for teaching and learning, as a formal and conceptual element within the work. Seeing the game design on the ground of the studio I am reminded of hopscotch games where the schoolyard asphalt was covered in many, interlinking games for many players. The notion of the journey as a physical and conceptual traversing of space is present in the game, and very much present in the playful non-linear, esoteric passage that is *grow*. A rainbow coloured circle marks the end of the game when the objects, finally, hit the wall. The random arrangement of grow is marked by spiky balls that are both beginnings and endings, fluorescent pink connectors that are bright junctions for the tubes and text. To make *grow* Barberis uses thin, flexible light filaments and connecting devices sourced from hose fittings, dog toys and other domestic objects. grow evokes the electrical and circulatory systems of the body that transmit fluids and electricity. *grow* is what it is. It doesn't exist before the moment of its making but is generated by a direct engagement with the space and materials where it is made, not as a shape or structure, but rather as an experience.

Barberis' practice is one that spans 25 years of making large-scale installations. *a set of verbs: visions and dreams* is a project about making, journeying and locating the work through process and investigation. It is a project about dreaming and engaging with the unconscious towards vision.

**Louiseann Zahra**, July 2005

1 Jones Amelia. *Body Art/Performing the subject.* Minneapolis, U.S.A.: University of Minnesota Press; 1998. p. 207

2 *Good News Bible - Today's English Version*. London, U.K.: United Bible Societies; 1976. p. 306

3 Irene Barberis in conversation with the writer, 15 July 2005

