

Stand and Deliver:
on the “Transformative Experience” in
Phyllida Barlow’s Sculptures
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I want my materials to be untransformed. Therefore, what the transformative experience is, I’m very unclear about.
Phyllida Barlow

The American comedian Lily Tomlin delivers the following joke in a flat, bored monotone:

I went to the store. I bought a wastebasket. The cashier put it in a bag. I brought the wastebasket home, I took it out of the bag. I crumpled up the bag. I tossed the crumpled bag into the wastebasket.

Tomlin’s droll tale turns on two drab objects (a shopping bag, a wastepaper basket) mutely trading places: from container to contained; from useful to useless; from outside to inside. I remembered that old joke – about minuscule ontological transformations in ordinary, lifeless objects – when looking at Phyllida Barlow’s sculpture *RIG: containers* (2011). This stack of inert materials is somehow endowed with agency, appealing as witty and comical, even pathetic and forlorn. How does Barlow transform static materials into sculptural beings?

In *containers*, an enormous (yet woefully inadequate) brown paper bag half-conceals a crumbling wire-netted cement cylinder which, propped on a few hapless casters, has spilled a few guilty handfuls of rubble beneath it. On one hand, in *containers* I admire Barlow’s formal expertise in assembling dry textures: the crunch and fold of the brown paper; the honeycomb wire-mesh pattern binding the weighty cement; the scattering of stones at the bottom, thinning from stony rubble to dust like a miniature rocky beach. On the other hand, if I ignore the physical attributes of each material and examine instead their purpose, I sense in *containers* a spirit of frustration, as each element fails its meagre job. The bag is too short to hide the guilty pillar. The pillar’s architectural sturdiness is undermined by the wobbly casters. The undersized wheels seem crushed and incapacitated, struggling to roll their overweight passenger. And the formless rubble looks abandoned, left to disintegrate in an unwelcome mess on the clean gallery floor.

Encountering Phyllida Barlow’s sculptures I enter a three-way conversation involving artist, matter, and myself – akin to the brief triangular relationship Tomlin found herself locked

into with two inanimate things, reducing her human agency to a sequence of responses. Approaching Barlow’s artworks, I adjust my actions to meet their wordless demands; I get gently pushed around. Room-sized installations nudge me along their edges. I circle nervously, hugging the wall (*SKIT*, 2005; *untitled: hoardings*, 2012) or driven out the gallery (*cul-de-sac*, 2019). I struggle to locate where Barlow’s artworks begin or end. How close should I get? Strolling beneath *untitled: dock: 5hungblocks* (2013) in the Tate Duveen Galleries, I look up uncomfortably at the ship-ping-container-sized boxes suspended overhead, observing the rickety structure supporting them. I remember Andrea Mantegna’s *Camera degli Sposi* (1465–74) and the young woman who looks down at me, mischievously contemplating whether to roll the stick she holds lightly and allow that sizeable potted plant to crash.¹

Sometimes viewers are forced to weave through scattered plinths, as in the gallery installation ... *later* (2012). With *untitled: 21 arches* (2012), a cluster of towering cement pipes turn their backs on me, curving their necks inwards as if whispering conspiratorially, excluding me from their tall gang. “We know nothing about a body until we can know what it can do, in other words, what its affects are,” Deleuze and Guattari once wrote;² in fact I apprehend Barlow’s art as I discover how the sculpture’s “body” impacts my own.

“I want the materials [in my sculptures] to be untransformed,” Phyllida Barlow has said. “Therefore, what the transformative experience is, I’m very unclear about.”³ In this essay I’d like to get to grips with that unexplained transformation, not by analysing aesthetic properties (weight, texture, size, colour – all of which Barlow manipulates superbly) but investigating instead how materials *behave*: how the artist treats and deploys them. For example, I note how Barlow always makes plain divisions of labour: some materials are sturdy workers, visibly under duress and engaged in heavy lifting (wood, metal, cement); others are spineless freeloaders and lazy flops (fabric, foam, plastic bags, ribbon). In *SKIT* (2005) a thicket of wooden poles criss-cross or stand upright while giddy pom-poms and tangled ribbons dangle idly, enjoying the free ride. I observe the same contrast in the soaring sculpture *untitled: dock: 5 stockadecrates* (2014), also in the Duveen Galleries. At its base stands a forest of multicoloured, multi-directional wooden poles, hard at work sustaining a cantilevered haul of bulging bags, boxes, ropes, and tubes.



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1:
Left: Phyllida Barlow, *RIG: untitled; containers; leaniungcoveredholed*, 2011, MDF, cement, casters, pegboard, polystyrene, wire netting, fabric, hardboard, plaster, paper bag; right: detail. Installation view, *RIG*, Hauser & Wirth, London, 2011



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2:
Phyllida Barlow, *untitled: hoardings*, 2012, timber, scrim, cement, black felt, paint. Installation view, Kiev Biennial, 2012

3:
Left: Andrea Mantegna, *Oculus in the Camera degli Sposi*, 1465-1474, Castello di San Giorgio, Mantua; right: detail

4:
Phyllida Barlow, *untitled: 21 arches*, 2012, polystyrene, cement, scrim, paint, varnish. Installation view, *siege*, New Museum, New York, 2012

5:
Phyllida Barlow, *untitled: contraption*, 2015, timber, plywood, scrim, cement, sand, paint, cardboard tube, upholstery foam, felt, fabric, rubber. Installation view, *set*, The Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, 2015

The skeletal bottom half dutifully holds aloft its idle cargo, protecting this heap of purposeless stuff from, say, a flash flood suddenly sweeping through the Tate. The top and bottom portions of *untitled: dock: 5 stockade crates* are a study in contrasts: carrier vs. carried; exposed vs. concealed; industrious vs. expendable; architecture vs. landfill.

Barlow's compositions are non-hierarchical yet some elements behave like stars – if not downright divas – while others assume humble, supporting roles. In *untitled: contraption* (2015) a body-like foam roll wrapped in Pompeian red reclines heavily – like a mummified empress, lying in state. The stiff grey armature below assumes a deferential and proletarian function, propping up this “royal corpse”. In *untitled: stacked objects on a piano* (2012) a grand-piano-shaped platform carries a motley bunch of pillows, pallets, and tubing – like a musical moving van, its temporary load strapped to the roof. Looking closely I spy a crop of short, overworked sticks at work beneath the piano – like the dark skinny legs carrying a fat beetle. Sometimes, as with the unstable items in Lily Tomlin's joke, a material's function imperceptibly shifts. In *untitled: stage* (2011) a tall shadowy jungle of timber “legs” supports a platform of layered pink polystyrene before suddenly switching purpose, magically re-emerging at the top as a sparse, unburdened field of short, bright, weightless shoots. Elsewhere, expectations are thwarted; in *fin*, part of *untitled: triple act 2015 (fin, hoop, box)*, a prop-like “boulder” (actually plaster, polystyrene and polyurethane foam) bears the weight of an inserted structural-looking plywood frame, lodged into its stony host's back like a massive parasite.

In emphasising the materials' “behaviours”, as I'm doing here, I verge dangerously on anthropomorphising Phyllida Barlow's art, projecting onto sculptures imaginary characters: defeated, disappointed containers; anti-social, secretive huddles of cement pipes; upholstered, sleeping aristocrats. In fact, as Briony Fer has noted, Barlow's sculptures “imply something about the movement of bodies without stating it, let alone depicting it.”⁴ Occasionally, however, her sculptures positively beg for personification: *untitled: bags* (1989) seems a line-up of semi-stuffed and leaning brown paper sacks of human height, like tired citizens waiting in a perpetual queue, supporting one another's tired and sagging bodies. *Object for an armchair* (1994) features a barrel-shaped roll of padding, plopped on a parlour chair and girdled by hard-working strips

of bright orange tape – like an obese great uncle, well-fed and bursting at the belt while hogging the living room's only comfy seat all damned Christmas day.

But there is no figuration here – no ill-mannered relatives; no baggy citizens – only my hyperactive imagination. Barlow's art balances hints of corporeal presence with allusions to abstract painting and sculpture, resulting in what Mark Godfrey has aptly described as a “push-and-pull between total abstraction and the work's ability to evoke the body”.⁵ Moreover, many sculptures prompt non-corporeal associations, recalling inanimate things: an airplane fuselage in *untitled: suspended burst-crushed box* (2013); deflated beach umbrellas, off-duty at summer's end in *untitled: parasols* (2007/2020; Fig. p. ##). Architectural connections abound: a modernist dovecote in *untitled: holder* (2014); multi-directional Piranesian bannisters and bridges in *untitled: structure* (2011; Fig. ##).

Could Barlow's ungraspable transformation have to do with imbuing materials with subtle humour, as with the lopsided, malfunctioning stack in *containers?* Some artworks suggest slapstick: a cement pour in *untitled: dunce* (2015) is squashed onto a sloping plinth like a pie in the face. Other compositions function like comedic duos; in *RIG: leaning covered holed* (2011) an erect cylindrical pegboard plays the “straight guy” to a stuffed, brick-red “fall guy” flopped on the floor. The chubby sad sack strapped to a bony ladder in *Bag on frame* (1992-93) together seem to impersonate Abbott and Costello, Mutt and Jeff. Barlow's humour can be cartoonish; *dock* always screams The Grinch to me, with his teetering sleigh-load of over-stuffed bags. Childhood is repeatedly evoked: homemade dens of draped sheets and tables are hinted at in *RIG: untitled: blocks* (2010). Pick-up sticks seem gigantified and re-assembled to become the jaunty base of *dock* or get “poured” from an overturned box in *untitled: stack* (2017). The pin-wheeled *untitled: grinder* (2014) suggests the brightly coloured wooden rattle of an infant the size of a football stadium.

“Each thing [*res*], as far as it can be by its own power, strives [*conatur*] to persevere in its being,” wrote Spinoza in his *Ethics*, and Barlow's materials follow this philosophical imperative.⁶ In her mind-boggling range of materials⁷ each is generally asked only to perform only an inherent job: to express an inner purpose “by its own power”. Bags hold. Paper wraps. Tape binds. Stuffing flops. Felt-circles stack. And Phyllida Barlow's chosen materials



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6:

Phyllida Barlow, *untitled: stackedobjectsonapi-ano*, 2012, polystyrene, scrim, cement, paint, varnish, fabric.

Installation view, *BRINK*, Ludwig Forum für Internationale Kunst, Aachen, 2012

7:

Phyllida Barlow, *untitled: stage*, 2011, timber, polystyrene, paint.

Installation view, *Sculptural Acts*, Haus der Kunst, Munich, 2011

8:

Phyllida Barlow, *fin*, from: *untitled: tripleact2015 (fin, hoop, box)*, timber, polyurethane foam, polystyrene, bonding plaster, steel, plywood, paint, scrim, PVA, sand, fabric, sawdust.

Installation view, *tryst*, Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas, Texas, 2015

9:

Phyllida Barlow, *untitled: bags*, 1989, wire netting, brown paper, parcel tape.

Installation view, Hermitage Road Industrial Estate, London, 1989

10:

Phyllida Barlow, *Object for an armchair*, 1994, blanket, curtain fabric, red tape, armchair.

Installation view, Elbrook House, Hertfordshire, 1994

11:

Phyllida Barlow, *untitled: structure*, 2011, timber, paint, plaster, screws.

Installation view, *Cast*, Kunstverein Nürnberg, 2011

12:

Phyllida Barlow, *Bag on frame*, 1992/93, paint, timber, fabric cushion, rubber cable.

Studio of the artist, Woodstock Road, London, 1992/93

13:

How the Grinch Stole Christmas!, 1966, director: Chuck Jones, film still, min. 25, CBS

are allowed to naturally “misbehave” too, revealing flaws and frailties. Poured cement oozes shapelessly. Thickly painted paper curls. Fabric droops and puckers. Cardboard creases and folds. Paint streaks into raw woodgrain. Rope and scrim fray. Strips of foam bend and drop haphazardly in her early *Shedmesh* (1976). Barlow ensures her work never looks fussed over, and dislikes when exhibitions turn out “over-planned and over-delivered”.⁸ In the same relaxed spirit, the artist’s assistants do not belabour their interventions, and are instructed to “use one gesture and never go back to it ... as if it’s a job which has to get done in the shortest possible time”.⁹ Her materials are never “improved”, never treated as deficient, never rejected as unworthy. Where sculptor Donald Judd cast away countless sheets of plywood for the slightest imperfection, Barlow seems endlessly accepting and forgiving of them all – however paint-splattered, irregular, rubbishy or unkempt. Her acrobatic sculptures might startle overall, but each constitutive element serves only its down-to-earth task.

Barlow’s invitation for each substance to “be itself” – her unconditional welcome of inherent weaknesses or idiosyncrasies – to me finds analogy in a school of modern parenting: one that resists moulding and encourages an individual child’s own proclivities. I’m venturing onto risky ground here, connecting art-making with motherhood. But truth is, looking at Phyllida Barlow’s sculptures, I am repeatedly reminded of parenting, with its instinctive, resourceful, attentive gestures. I note how her process involves starting with small, manageable pieces and results in finished artworks larger than herself, each displaying a sort of independent temperament. I note all the emphatic “raising”: on ladders, scaffolds, shelves – like the cargo held protectively aloft in *dock*. The thick upholstered pillow that buffers a pegboard’s fall in *RIG: untitled; containers; leaning covered holed* (2011) reminds me of the sofa cushions pre-emptively scattered on the floor to safeguard accident-prone toddlers. The pink fabric-wrapped points beneath the red supine “body” in *untitled: contraption* (2015) recall the padded corner guards all over the house to blunt child-unfriendly table corners and spiky edges. Equal dollops of cement at the foot of each pillar in *RIG: untitled: blocks* (2011) bring to mind the dinner-time job of distributing pudding or mashed potato in uniform portions, avoiding kitchen-table squabbles. Crazy looping cables and ropes seem the scribbles of children’s

drawings, while the spray of colourful paper tape in *untitled: hoards* (2013) reminds me of last-minute streamers devised at home to festoon a child’s near-forgotten birthday. Often the logic behind Barlow’s sculptures seems to collect like with like – *untitled: stacked chairs* (2014); *untitled: bound fence* (2018) – and I think of a parent’s perpetual activity of sorting stuff into cohesive piles: laundry, toys, socks, sports equipment, you name it.

To grasp Phyllida Barlow’s subtle “untransformed transformations”, I’d like to consider the influence of motherhood on her artistry – conventionally an art-critical no-go area. Clement Greenberg belittled women artists who nurtured illusions of being both “housewife” and artist, for example when dissing sculptor Anne Truitt.¹⁰ In the art world, the spectre of motherhood still threatens like a calamitous void in a female artist’s life – a catastrophe from which her artistry may never recover. Once, back in the 1980s, when Barlow’s kids were small and inevitably dominated her days and thoughts, an art school student audience tut-tutted Barlow dismissively for admitting her role as mother took precedence over that of artist. And before then, while studying at the Royal Academy, a tutor disparagingly implied that her art-training was wasted, given her (inevitable) artistic disappearance into motherhood.

To be sure, I am not suggesting Barlow’s artistry is literally child-like. Her mastery of colour, weight and texture, as well as her lifetime of exquisite drawings and ability to scale forms up masterfully, achieving spell-binding multi-storey heights and multi-gallery expanses, puts paid to any suggestion of naivety. And Barlow’s sculptures are no more her “symbolic children” than Donald Judd’s stacks are stand-ins for his daughters. Barlow’s process of sorting like with like, mentioned above, is a principle adopted by many sculptors – such as Noah Purifoy or Jackie Windsor, neither of whom were parents – and moreover echoes the piles gathered in a builder’s yard. Barlow adopts plenty of “non-mothering-like” techniques to animate her work, for example her regular insertion of unfinished-looking paint-splattered walls and floors to replace the stultifying cleanliness of an art gallery with the transitory aliveness of a messy studio.

Maybe I think of “mothering” because I know Phyllida Barlow and her husband raised five kids. Maybe I think of “mothering” because the yards upon yards of adhesive tape encircling brown cardboard in *untitled: dock*:



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14:

Phyllida Barlow, *RIG: untitled*; blocks, 2011, polystyrene, fabric, timber, cement. Installation view, *RIG*, Hauser & Wirth, London, 2011

15:

Phyllida Barlow, *untitled: stackedchairs*, 2014, timber, plywood, cement, paint, sand, PVA, varnish. Installation view, *GIG*, Hauser & Wirth, Somerset, 2014

16:

Noah Purifoy, *Chairs II*, 1993. Installation view, Noah Purifoy Outdoor Desert Art Museum, Joshua Tree, California, 2016

17:

Phyllida Barlow, *untitled: dock: crushedtower*, 2014, timber, steel armature, cardboard, tape, polyurethane foam. Installation view, *dock*, Tate Britain, London, 2014

18:

Phyllida Barlow, *untitled: bolsters*, 2011, fabric, polystyrene, wood, cement. Installation view, *Cast*, Kunstverein Nürnberg, 2011

crushed tower (2014) instantly triggered memories of my mother's insane, over-protected packages, sent to me at school. (Mum would wrap a \$2 box of biscuits in \$8.75 worth of duct tape – and I mean heavy-weave electrician's tape, merciless in its grip. The whole exhausting effort to access the now-broken cookies seemed the perfect metaphor for my mother's tenacious, time-consuming, impenetrable love.) But mostly I think of "mothering" when I notice the unexpected, minute gestures of, well, tenderness. The way Barlow emphatically reinforces hinges and joints with extra twists of fabric or daubs of plaster (e.g. *untitled: hoardings*, 2012), as if offering her help to strengthen weak spots. Or the "blanket" attentively folded beneath the painted Duchampian readymade in *untitled:bottle rack* (2009) or tucked under a tilted construction in *SWAMP: untitled: parapet* 2010 – as if to make these objects' landing softer, their stay more comfortable.

I realise my risk here of over-symbolising, whereby the two upholstered bundles perched in matching trellises in *untitled: bolsters* (2011) would necessarily be interpreted as long-bodied twin cradles, overlooking this work's exquisite study in formal contrasts: the stock-straight, weight-bearing, upward-pushing wooden planks in a natural dull grey-brown set against the doughy, wrinkly, downward-sagging pillows in a radioactive shade of orange cheese-puff. My point is not to sentimentalise Barlow's art; however, I want here to counter the art world's ongoing stigmatisation of motherhood – with its lingering sexism, perhaps ageism – as an artistic black hole, devouring female creative energies: an embarrassment at best, a death sentence at worst. Could we consider, instead, the skill set of parenting (by men or women) as a contribution to art making? And can we re-conceive of a woman/mother's artistic life as all-of-a-piece – rather than shot through with the empty blank of child-rearing?

Of course, in early parenthood, an artist can no longer luxuriate in vast stretches of studio time. And concentration gets blasted by the perpetual needs, interruptions, impulses, joys. Nonetheless, Barlow's early 1990s series of thick, oblong sculptures (including *object for armchair*) hilariously cropping up throughout the house – on upright pianos, TV sets, an ironing board – demonstrate that her artistry never switched off, even during peak motherhood. Domesticity proved a site for experimentation and, I think, infused and animated her subsequent work too.

What is the "transformative experience" that enlivens Phyllida Barlow's artworks, imperceptibly achieved without altering her unadorned materials? W. J. T. Mitchell has theorised that "objects" are transformed into "things" when they seem to look back at us: "when the mute idol speaks"¹¹ – when the pair of non-living protagonists in Lily Tomlin's joke stare back at her, demanding that the comedian adjust her actions as the two items exchange jobs.

Barlow looks and listens closely to each distinct material and responds by displaying something like *respect*. She offers each suitable employment (binding, carrying, lifting, bursting); she brings out their understated humour. And – as witnessed, say, in the absurd extra pillows lovingly propped under the "elbows" of *Object for an armchair* – Phyllida Barlow treats even the humblest of materials as worthy of attention, deserving of her care.

- 1 Of course, just as Mantegna's painted trompe l'oeil hardly puts visitors in peril, Barlow's scrupulously engineered sculptures are never literally hazardous.
- 2 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980), translated from French by Brian Massumi (University of Minnesota Press, 1987): 257.
- 3 Phyllida Barlow, quoted from "Between a Stroke and a Smack: Interview with Ronnie Simpson", *Stint* (Warwick: Warwick Arts Centre, 2008): 7.
- 4 Briony Fer, *Nairy Baghramian and Phyllida Barlow* (London: Serpentine Gallery, 2010): 72.
- 5 Mark Godfrey, "Learning Experience: Interview with Phyllida Barlow", in *frieze*, September 2006.
- 6 Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part 3: Proposition 6, cited in Thomas Cook, "Conatus: A Pivotal Doctrine at the Centre of the *Ethics*", in *Spinoza: A Collective Commentary*, eds. Michael Hampe, Ursula Renz, Robert Schnepf (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011): 150.
- 7 Including: foam, cement, wire, polystyrene, folding chairs, sand, sawdust, ribbons, fabric, timber offcuts, steel, plastic, paint, aluminium, rubber tubing, rubber cable, pegboard, canvas, spray paint, paper rope, tape, felt, piping, plaster, PVA, wire netting, wood, scrim, varnish, casters, corrugated card, MDF, sand, felt, rope, tubing, canvas, wadding, resin, crates, fibreglass, carpet felt, shuttering ply,

- shelving brackets, ironing board
and domestic rubbish.
- 8 *Stint*, 2008: 3 (see note 3).
 - 9 Barlow, in Oliver Basciano,
“Phyllida Barlow”, *Art Review*,
March 2016: 77.
 - 10 Clement Greenberg, “Changer”,
in *Vogue*, May 1968: 284. “She
[Truitt] remains less known than
she should be as a radical
innovator. She certainly does
not ‘belong’. But then how could
a housewife, with three small
children, living in Washington
belong? How could such a
person fit the role of pioneer of
far-out art?”
 - 11 W.J.T. Mitchell, *What do Pictures
Want?: The Lives and Loves of
Images* (Chicago: University of
Chicago Press, 2005): 156.