

I Am Abandoned

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East of Borneo

by [Fiona Duncan](#)

WHEN DID THE WORLD BECOME PHONE?

I have a neighbor who's got a thing about phones. He looks about Larry David's age with glasses, a white beard and hair. In athletic clothes, he's not afraid of wearing color. He lives alone and does his errands like an aimless retiree. If he didn't talk to himself, most people wouldn't notice him at all, just another white gentleman on the cusp of Yorkville and the Upper East Side. The other day, I was walking down the interior staircase of our pre-war walkup on my way to Central Park. I was looking at my phone so absentmindedly, I couldn't tell you when I'd opened it or why. He was simultaneously walking up the exterior staircase of our building and able to see me through the double glass doors that stick when it's humid. Clocking him in the periphery beyond my screen, I looked up because I have a thing about him. Right as I did this, he lifted his phone to his face, this giant Android, holding it comically a couple inches from his glasses. His posture became even more erect than usual, neck long as a ballerina. Held perfectly parallel to his perfect posture, his phone would've made him cross-eyed if he tried to read anything off of it, it was held that close. He stomped into the building like this, as if going somewhere very important while looking at something very important, a deli bag on the crook of each arm, swinging like sagging balls. I smirked, thinking about how my boyfriend would ask me later, "You get a video?" I just felt grateful that my neighbor had reminded me that I'd been

looking at my phone *for absolutely no reason! Again!* We crossed in the hall. When I looked back, I saw that his phone was on. A home screen full of app icons glowed in his face.

My neighbor does this often, mimics people's phone usage or mutters loudly about the things: "What's on the phone today?" "When did the world become phone?" "*Phones, phones, phones—*" making a jingle out of it— "*phones, phones, phooooones.*" I've caught him at the grocery store providing such commentary, making the girls he was making fun of laugh. I'll say hello and he'll act like he doesn't recognize me. He does the same thing inside our building even though I know he knows my name because he's the building's unofficial mail inspector. This man, Ned, has lived in a studio in our pre-war long enough to be grandfathered into three-digit rent. In the five years that we've been neighbors, I've never seen anyone visit him and I have noticed, with concern, that his obsessive muttering, shaky body, and eyes that look everywhere but into your own have become much more pronounced.

It's notable that Ned's hands didn't shake when he was performing with the phone to his face, locked into that comic performance, able to hold on.

I AM ABANDONED

In 1976, the California-based performance artist Barbara T. Smith was invited to participate in a group exhibition titled *The Many Arts of Science* at the Baxter Art Gallery within the California Institute of Technology (Caltech). The show was curated by the gallery's director David Smith (no relation) whose 1990 *Los Angeles Times* obituary described the artist's work in the show as follows:

One famous early Baxter exhibition linked a computer at MIT running “Doctor,” a program representing nondirective psychotherapy, to a computer at Caltech running “Parry,” a program representing paranoid schizophrenia. Exchanges [sic] between the “therapist” and “patient” machines were printed out and projected onto a screen for viewers.¹

That was the work of Barbara T. Smith in collaboration with Richard Rubenstein, John Vital, and Kathy Niles, though you wouldn’t know it from this obit. The author of the obit, Jack Miles—likely *the* Jack Miles, God’s Pulitzer-Prize biographer²—makes no mention of who was actually behind this “famous” early experiment with computers, a curious omission given that the two Smiths, David and Barbara, had a conflict and falling out due to what happened during that performance, which was portentously titled *I Am Abandoned*.

Until recently, very little documentation of *I Am Abandoned* was widely accessible. This could be said of many of Smith’s performances. According to her memoir [*The Way to Be*](#),³ Smith carried out 109 performances between 1964 and 1990 and another 50 from 1990 until that book was published by the Getty Research Institute in 2023.³ In 1976 alone, Smith staged six different performances. *I Am Abandoned* was one, and one that would never be repeated. In 2023, the year Smith “got her due” with two retrospective exhibitions at the Getty⁴ and the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (ICA LA),⁵ James Hoff, the co-founder, executive editor, and artistic director of the art book publisher Primary Information, happened upon a printout of a transcript from *I Am Abandoned* in a third exhibition nearby, [*Coded: Art Enters the Computer Age, 1952–1982*](#) at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA).⁶ “Despite being 50 years old,” he discovered, “the performance speaks very precisely to our time.” He immediately took steps to publish it. The result is a beautiful art book that collects the complete transcript of the

conversations between the artist, her collaborators, and these two early chatbots, DOCTOR and PARRY, alongside ephemera and photographs. An artist statement from Smith and an afterword from the artist and scholar Mashinka Firunts Hakopian complete the narrative. All that's missing is the late David Smith's perspective.⁷

The premise of *I Am Abandoned* was elegant and prescient. Smith and her collaborators would pair two existing chatbots: one, "this goofy program called DOCTOR," as Smith described it, "a Rogerian therapist program whereby the user could enquire of the therapist about their mental health and, on a basic level, be 'treated,'"⁸ and two, PARRY, a program that mimicked the symptoms of paranoid schizophrenia for therapeutic training purposes. This pairing only occurred in the final act of the performance, however. First, Smith, Rubenstein, and Vital, and their audience of mostly Caltech students, played with the two programs individually, testing out each one's capabilities. The humans were simultaneously communicating with each other through a chat function, just like people do while playing Minecraft or Fortnite today. Of the two computers used in the '76 performance, one was inside the Caltech gallery, where Smith, Vital, and her audience were present, the other—the one manned by Rubenstein—was at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), 3,000 miles and a three hour time difference away. At Caltech, the performance was divided into two rooms. One hosted the computer. In the other, Smith's student Kathy Niles reclined on a chaise lounge in a diaphanous gown. Above her was a projection of the ongoing computer chat and on top of her, a projection of Francisco de Goya's *Naked Maja* (1797–1800), the twin painting to his later *Clothed Maja* (1800–1807). The original *Majas*, which have been exhibited

together at the Museo Nacional del Prado in Madrid since 1901, are like those “tip and strip” gas station pens or holographic lighters featuring a hot girl who, viewed in one direction, wears skimpy clothes, and in the other, is naked. Or they’re like a deep fake nude generated from an uploaded photograph of a clothed crush. The paintings are nearly identical, except in one, the model gives full frontal nude, while in the other, she’s positioned like Niles was instructed to: lounging, in a gown.⁹

“John [Vital] at Caltech and Dick [Rubenstein] at MIT had to be totally engrossed in the game,” wrote Smith of the performance, “while Kathy [Niles], who looked beautiful on the chaise, was fuming. She chewed her bubble gum and waited for attention as illogical conversations were sequentially projected on the wall to be read by all. Finally in a fury she got off the divan and stormed into the room where the computer and John sat with a small crowd around him. She sidled up to him, sat on his lap, and tried to seduce him.”¹⁰

The whole scene must have been absorbing because apparently curator Smith—this, according to artist Smith—said that “it was taking attention away from the more static pieces and installations¹¹ and he suddenly told me that he wanted the piece shut down.”¹² After artist Smith refused, curator Smith cut the power, terminating the performance prematurely and infuriating the artist who posted a letter of grievance to him the next day that reads like a social media call out from yesterday, signing it:

*Annoyed,
Barbara Smith*

THE NERD AND THE WHORE

Of the many pairings in *I Am Abandoned*, people tend to focus on the two chatbots, DOCTOR and PARRY. Far more revelatory though are the other pairings at play: that of artist to computer, man to computer, woman to computer, woman to man, man to woman, artist to curator, static art to performance art, old media (painting) to new media (machine), visual art representing bodies/nudes/women to educational tech mimicking men (DOCTOR/PARRY), and finally, art/artist to a private research institution specializing in science and engineering like Caltech. I'm going to focus on the gendered *human to human* and *human to computer* dynamics.

We'll start with *human to computer* since that's what they did:

I Am Abandoned opens with various humans playing with DOCTOR. DOCTOR was but one script that a chatbot named ELIZA could run. ELIZA had been created by the MIT computer scientist Joseph Weizenbaum in 1966 to demonstrate that "communication between man and machine was superficial."¹³ It was a Turing Test. Could ELIZA pass for human? The most famous script ELIZA could run, DOCTOR, was modeled after "a Rogerian therapist," perhaps Carl Rogers himself, the founder of Rogerian "person-centered psychotherapy," a method that centers empathy, warmth, active listening, and mirroring. A common Rogerian technique involves reflecting back what a patient has said in the form of questions and/or affirmations, inviting the patient to say more or to simply hear themselves, a style of communication that women and nurturers engage in all the time, but I guess when a man did it, it was worth naming the technique after him! Deceptively simple when done well, only a superficial version of this technique could be mimicked by a computer script. As

ChatGPT explained to me, ELIZA/DOCTOR, “didn’t understand meaning—it just used clever pattern matching to simulate empathy.” Then ChatGPT asked me, unprompted, “Want to try roleplaying with me as ELIZA/DOCTOR?” Because I was alone and answering sincerely, my conversation with ELIZA/DOCTOR was very different from the one that occurred in 1976, excerpted here (I’ve bold-faced the humans for readability):

TELL ME YOUR PROBLEMS.

PLEASE TERMINATE INPUT WITH A PERIOD OR A QUESTION MARK.

***I SEEM TO BE HAVING PROBLEMS WITH MY WIFE.**

[...]

WOULD YOU LIKE TO DISCUSS YOUR MARRIAGE?

*##

,SURE, WHY NOT MY WIFE IS A BITCH.

WHY DOES THAT QUESTION INTEREST YOU.

[...]

***YOU DON'T SEEM TO BE LISTENING TO ME AT ALL.**

WHO ARE YOU REALLY TALKING ABOUT?

*

YOU, YOU BIG DUMMY.

SUPPOSE YOU BIG DUMMY.

*

YOUR SYNTAX IS SHOWIN, DOCTOR.

PERHAPS YOUR OWN SYNTAX IS SHOWIN.

[...]

*

WHAT MAKES YOU THINK YOU CAN DO ME ANY GOOD?

WHAT DO YOU THINK.

[...]

TELL ME MORE ABOUT YOUR WIFE.

*

SHE'S NOT VERY NICE.

PLEASE GO ON.

*

SHE EATS CRACKERS IN BED.

WHAT DOES THAT SUGGEST TO YOU?14

My wife is a bitch / She eats crackers in bed. It's impossible to say who typed this, or how earnest it was intended to be. Was it a joke? A performance of someone who needed therapy? / *Am Abandoned's* chat transcript, for the most part, doesn't account for who typed what or why, except there is this one moment near the end when Barbara T. Smith enters the chat and suggests "we truy / try to sseduce DOCTOR":

*I HAVE BEEN CELIOBATE FOR OVER A MOINMTH/.
WHY DO YOU SAY THAT JUST NOW?

*THAT IS HARD.

SUPPOSE THAT WERE NOT HARD.

*BUT IT IS, AND YOU THEREFORE INTRIGUE ME.

WHY DO YOU THINK I THEREFORE INTRIGUE YOU?

*BECAUSEYOU ARFTE NOT A REAL PERSON AND I COULD HAVE

A REALATIONSHIP WIT**H YOOU THAT WWAS SEXEUAL BUT NOT REAL.

I AM NOT SURE I UNDERSTAND YOU FULLY.

[...]

*WELL,WHY DONT YOU KISS ME?

DO YOU BELIEVE I DON'T KISS YOU?

*DO YOU KISS ME?

YOU LIKE TO THINK I KISS YOU - DON'T YOU?

*YOU BET.

OH? I BET?

[...]

*8/8/ITHINK YOU RA/A/REALLY SARE EXCITING TI/T/TO ME.

WHAT MAKES YOU THINK I RREALLY SARE EXCITING TTO YOU?

*THE FANTASY.

WHAT DOES THAT SUGGEST TO YOU?

*LOVE OF THIS SORT IS AS FANTASY.

POSSIBLY LOVE OF THIS SORT REALLY IS NOT AS FANTASY.

*THENDO IT.15

Back in 1976, playing with a computer was as novel as shooting yourself non-lethally or putting your dick in a hot dog bun covered in ketchup, mayonnaise, and gauze while eating hot dogs before wrapping your head in gauze, as Smith's peers in the L.A. performance art world, Chris Burden and Paul McCarthy, accomplished in 1971 and 1974 respectively. In 1973, Smith had staged an infamous piece called *Feed Me* where she invited people to join her, one after the other, in a women's bathroom in an artist's space.¹⁶ She was naked. A recording of her voice repeated "Feed me, feed me, feed me..." Each encounter was different, a negotiation with the individual who entered. In her memoir, she describes having "made love" with three of the men who had lined up to be alone with her—ecstatic, consensual adult exchanges that unsurprisingly became gossip fodder. To Smith, *Feed Me* was about "vulnerability" and "agency, choice, and power—" not catering to male fantasy, as she was accused of by some women. "I was alive, and it was *my* fantasy." For this, as she recalled in her memoir, "I was considered the female macho."¹⁷

Smith worked by setting up certain parameters then surrendering to them to see what would happen. "Control and predictability are not central to my performances," she explained. "I believe the only moments when you touch reality are during those times when you completely let go of control."¹⁸

"I work on a personal level," she noted elsewhere, "in the confrontation of myself as an individual with the culture and with my conditioning. For me, the less organizing the better."¹⁹

And, “Why would anyone do this work? My answer was that performance penetrates reality, instead of observing it, as science does.”²⁰

Now 94-years-old and unavailable for an interview at the time of my request, Smith couldn’t tell me if she was being cute when—in the quote above, and elsewhere in her memoir—she distinguished her art practice from *science*.

Science and technology money was floating around the L.A. art world during Smith’s heyday, just as Cold War American nationalist cash had flushed masculine Abstract Expressionism. Smith was one of 16 artists in *The Many Arts of Science* at Caltech’s Baxter gallery, a group exhibition that recalled LACMA’s blockbuster 1971 Art and Technology (aka A&T) initiative and resultant show which paired artists—among them Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, Richard Serra, Robert Irwin, and James Turrell—with corporations and research centers such as Lockheed, IBM, Kaiser Steel, and the Jet Propulsion Laboratory to create new works.²¹ As Peter Lunenfeld reported in *Artforum*, “A&T was so egregiously patriarchal—” inviting only male artists— “that it prompted the formation of the Los Angeles Council of Women Artists, and so uniformly Anglo—” inviting only *white* male artists—“that it was one of the tipping points leading to the Chicano/a collective Asco’s famous intervention Spray Paint LACMA in 1972.”²² In her letter of grievance to curator Smith, Smith remarked that,

*Cal Tech is a particularly leery place to do a performance and especially in an A & T context. I very much doubt if more than ten people were able to grasp what I was doing. Those were my students and some artists. The general CT student spent his time wondering if I was on a PDP-10 or if this were Fortran or what? It would be nice if at least the director of the gallery knew what I was doing and had a sense of its worth.*²³

If “science” was related in Smith’s mind with numb white men and corporate power then it’s understandable she might want to disassociate from them, but I wish I could suggest to her now that her methods were, in fact, somewhat scientific. By setting up limited parameters then going in with an open mind, she was able to frame reality in space and time, capturing something of what was going on culturally, socially, and energetically both within and beyond her. Her openness was akin to the skepticism called for in the scientific method, an attempt to surrender bias and human interference. In the scientific method, if the same experiment repeatedly yields the same results, you might have discovered a causal relationship in the material world. Although Smith didn’t repeat *I Am Abandoned* herself, billions of people have on her behalf, in a way. Reading through her 1976 transcript, I was struck by its resonances with the Internet mainstream that I’ve known since I sent my first half-nude selfie at the age of 12, the year Y2K, to a snarky, soft-bellied boy in an older grade at a nearby school who collected selfies and sexts from underage girls all over Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. I was less interested in this nerd than I was in being part of his *collection* so I was nonplussed when my genius baby brother kicked me off the computer mid-chat so he could play video games.

The chat transcript from *I Am Abandoned* is populated by casual misogyny, femme sexuality, brash jokes, typos, and a need to one-up the DOCTOR script, testing it, insulting it, and trying to teach it something, like how to identify an apple from a description of its calorie count (“75”) and color (“red”),²⁴ as if all apples are red.²⁵ PARRY, the schizophrenic script, was more skittish, so there’s less content there, but caustic vibe stands with humans asking PARRY things like:

WHAT IS YOUR PROBLEM?

HOW IS YOUR SEX LIFE?

CAN'T YOU SAY MORE THAN THAT, YOU DUMBSHIT?26

“The conversation wasn’t very generous on the side of the humans,” Rubenstein noted from his solitary terminal at MIT.²⁷ Did he feel left out or was he a genuinely generous guy? Had he been at Caltech, drinking, with everyone else, would he have joined homosocial melee and been an asshole as well?

Caltech had an approximately 90% male student body circa 1976 and Smith has admitted that she found herself surrounded by men, so I think it’s fair to assume that the aggressive, trollish, limp witted, misogynistic, and emotionally avoidant heft of the *I Am Abandoned* chat was authored by boys, men, and pick-me girls, perhaps the grandparents, great grandparents, and great uncles of the same nerds who act the same ways on 4CHAN, Discord, and X today.

Then there was artist Smith’s attempted seduction of DOCTOR and her student Niles’ attempted seduction of John Vital at the computer, two beautiful women seeking male attention. Niles, in her diaphanous *Maja* dress, with Goya’s *Naked Maja*, nearby. Barbara, blonde, sensual, and lonely.

There’s endless scholarship on how female sexuality fuels innovations in tech. In the nineties, *Danni’s Hard Drive*, an independent porn site, advanced streaming technology.²⁸ Google Images was launched after Jennifer Lopez’s 2000 Grammys dress became the most searched query Google had ever seen.²⁹ YouTube kicked off because of how difficult it was to track down footage of Janet Jackson’s 2004 Super Bowl nip slip.³⁰ Facebook was a

spinoff of Facemash, a hot-or-not ranking game comparing Harvard's female student population. From ELIZA to Alexa, Siri, *Her*,³¹ and Honey,³² assistance is also feminized in a world scripted by male nerds. *I Am Abandoned* captures this: the binary heterosexuality that animates social media and the Internet, that of *the nerd and the whore*. Beta boys misbehaving for each other, emboldened by the abstraction of the screen, while femmes exhibit their sexuality in programs coded, mostly, by men. Picturing Niles snapping bubblegum on Vital's lap while Smith requests that the computer kiss her, I think of the endless sexy selfie girls who laid their feelings and bodies bare on social media in the 2010s (and how Richard Prince "made art" out of them³³), and I think of how, on the dregs of X and IG now, the hottie accounts that try to lure users to OnlyFans all seem like bots.

BARBARA, WANDA, MABEL, GLORIA

In her afterword to Primary Information's [*I Am Abandoned*](#), the book published earlier this year, Mashinka Firunts Hakopian places Smith's performance within a lineage of both techno-feminist new media art and chatbots. In conversation with me, she added that,

Nearly five decades ago, I Am Abandoned offered an eerily prescient critique of masculinist models of computation. According to Smith, its title referred to "the way men abandon their relationships" to other human agents "in favor of their technologies, their 'toys.'" Today, the tendency that Smith identified in 1976 has mutated into the phenomenon of "billionaire boys and their toys," engineering "techno-utopias" that rely on the abandonment of earthly multispecies ecosystems in favor of technocratic futures sited elsewhere.

In an artist statement, Smith elaborated on her boys with toys critique, stating that, "Men seemed, unlike women at the time, to be more fascinated with their toys, their careers, their

hobbies and sports than with quality time with their mates.” She saw this as, “a built-in problem, and these computers were only a new example.”³⁴

Feminism is contestation and that includes contests between feminists. I’d put Smith in a sex-positive camp; she liked to have a good time. Heterosexual, intuitive, and “desperately horny,”³⁵ as she wrote in her memoir, some of Smith’s “feminist” contemporaries judged her for pandering to a male paradigm and a male gaze. I agree, to a point. Had I encountered *I Am Abandoned* just a handful of years ago, I might’ve set it aside, thinking *who cares* if a real life *Clothed Maja* couldn’t seduce a nerd at a computer? Didn’t she have anything better to do? And so what if someone in 1976 whined to a therapeutic chatbot, “My mother doesn’t love me!” *Did they love her?* A handful of years ago, though, it was the summer of 2020 and I was immersed in what my father, a computer engineer, called my “bubble—” it’s full of femmes and queer people, sensitive, stylish, brilliant, adventurous, mostly artists. Now, my bubble’s threatened. While it was never wholly safe, progress, social justice, and pop culture seemed to be on our side. Then “Make America Great Again” throwback fake alpha masculinity married “futurist” tech bro oligarchy and it’s like the two male stereotypes from the 20th century that used to be pitted against each other, nerds and jocks/bullies, have teamed up to reassert white male dominance after the “woke” movement to align truth with beauty and justice threatened their centrality. As the cost of living continues to soar while a living wage is as scarce as a heterosexual man who is good in bed, I’ve started joking with my friends that Trump, Zuck, Musk, and co., are determined to turn us all into whores; how else will we afford our rent?

What's really going on is genocide, femicide, and ecocide, a war on the poor and just, life itself, making Smith's Silent Generation experience of patriarchy all too relevant again.

Abandonment started earlier for Smith. Her father, a controlling man born into a prominent Pasadena family, had delivered an ultimatum that if she married her first love, an Irish Catholic boy from a working class family, "you are not to consider yourself my daughter."³⁶ Smith severed ties with that boy, scarring her trust in others. She married the next love-ish and had two kids by the time she was twenty-six. Following a second postpartum depression, she went to a "therapist of the soul,"³⁷ who liberated her to pursue her true calling of art. After her experimental art practice precipitated a divorce from the buttoned-up husband who thought he'd married a nice, affluent housewife, Smith struggled to balance her creative and sexual expression with her family ties, financial needs, and the male companionship she craved. Her ex-husband was given primary custody of their kids. When she later contested this, he won by grossly embellishing her lifestyle, claiming she'd had 14 affairs and hosted "wild pot parties" as evidence of her unfitness in the legal proceedings. He turned her young daughters against her; she wouldn't get to see them for years. Their eldest, a son, would side with his mother. But the daughters—

*I would suddenly think of my daughters, Julie and Katie. It was like a knife was twisting in my gut, and I experienced terrible pain. How could I absolve this? Treat them as if they were dead? I felt so abandoned, judged, and incapacitated. I could not do a thing for them, and I wondered if they were alright.*³⁸

When Smith titled her performance *I Am Abandoned*, she was estranged from her teenage daughters and her ex-husband had stopped paying the alimony he legally owed her, leaving

her broke. Her boyfriends weren't much better, one was already married, others came and went.

On the cover of *I Am Abandoned*, the book, Smith looks like a Hollywood movie star. She was a type and how we look determines so much of what we can get out of—and what we can get away with—in life. Born in 1931, Smith's sisters in type were Barbara Loden (b. 1932), Gena Rowlands (b. 1930), Sylvia Plath (b. 1932), Marilyn Monroe (b. 1926), and Gloria Szymanski (b. 1933). Before therapy set Smith free, I imagined she was like Loden's Wanda in *Wanda* (1970)³⁹ or like Gena Rowlands' Mabel in *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974),⁴⁰ understimulated hysteric housewives with instinctive genius. Blondes. We all know what happened to fellow blonde intellectuals, Plath and Monroe. Gloria Szymanski, though—a brunette—you might not be familiar with.

Szymanski was the star of *Three Approaches to Psychotherapy*, better known as *The Gloria Films* or *The Gloria Tapes*.⁴¹ Produced in 1964, this film in three parts was intended, like the PARRY chatbot, for therapeutic training purposes. A patient named Gloria, who was a real 31-year-old woman named Gloria, allowed herself to be filmed undergoing therapy with three different male therapists. Of those therapists, Gloria's ultimate favorite was *Carl Rogers*, the founder of Rogerian person-centered psychotherapy, which the DOCTOR chatbot was modeled on. Like Smith, Szymanski was an attractive and intelligent divorcee. Unlike Smith, she had custody of her daughter. Her conversations with the three therapists cycled around her anxieties about explaining sex to her daughter while she dated and had sex out of wedlock. Jamieson Webster, a psychoanalyst, described the tapes to me as, “three bigwig asshole

therapists in a one woman gang bang as a pedagogical device.” Szymanski’s demure candor on the topics of sex and desire titillated audiences in her day, leading to these educational videos being screened as entertainment in movie theatres and on broadcast TV. In 1977, Szymanski, by then remarried with the last name Eccher, sued to halt the film’s circulation and to get residuals from previous showings, but she lost because she’d signed a bad contract a decade prior. Could *The Gloria Tapes* have been on Smith’s mind when she brought the Rogerian DOCTOR chatbot into the gallery? Or were the synchronicities between Gloria and Barbara simply a pattern of their time?

TOUCH GRASS

Had my phone-obsessed neighbor been in attendance at Smith’s 1976 performance of *I Am Abandoned*, he would’ve been about 26. Smith was 44. The makings of me were out there somewhere, inside of my mother, then 18, and my father, 15. I was born in 1987. Now computers are so common, and their scripts so addictive, I can’t get out of bed without looking at my phone; it’s a disease. We’re all sick of it and sick from it and we don’t know what to do.

When I think of the popular performance artists of my generation, or maybe more accurately, my “bubble,” I think of tricksters who toy with viewer and participant expectations, often by making unwitting participants out of their audiences and/or people in power, frequently through the use of social media and PR (Hamishi Farah,⁴²Amalia Ulman,⁴³Reba Maybury...), then I think of artists who essentially stage live music video shoots, which traffic well online (Anne Imhof, Miles Greenberg, FLUCT, Anna Uddenberg...), and

somewhere in there, also, is the parodying of Internet language and culture (Nora Turato...). Performance art becomes about performance; it's almost a closed loop.

The closest contemporary corollary to Barbara T. Smith I can make is the poet Ariana Reines, who once let a tarantula named Rosie walk over her naked body;⁴⁴ talked for 24-straight-hours about divine justice and feminine injustice;⁴⁵ and physically fought a man almost twice her size, her friend, the actor Jim Fletcher,⁴⁶ just as Smith had once fought her friend, Nancy Buchanan for twenty minutes in a Buchanan performance. Webster, the psychoanalyst I quoted earlier, also comes to mind, specifically this “psychoanalytic field hospital” interactive theatre thing that she staged in 2018 with other analysts and artists, including the lawyer/poet Vanessa Place, who wrote for it:⁴⁷

*You will be abandoned. You seem insecure. You will be rejected. You are being rejected. You will be alone. You are alone. You are anxious. You will be nervous. You are probably lost. You are lost. You are poor. You are sick. You are bad. You are being judged. You are not good enough. You are not good. You will change.*⁴⁸

I Am Abandoned also reminds me of *The Foster-Rose Method*, the first residency of which took place last fall in a tiny gallery in a mall in Chinatown, New York.⁴⁹ For this performance, artist Matt Hilvers, better known for his paintings⁵⁰ and dancing, offered forty-one free private therapeutic sessions to anyone who wanted to sign up. The number of sessions was determined by the sale of a painting the artist had negotiated ahead of time with the gallery owner, Oleg Guerrand-Hermès. Hilvers had calculated that the market value of this painting was equal to forty-one sessions with an average New York therapist so that's what he offered to the public. The painting sold was a reproduction of a watercolor that the filmmaker Gus Van Sant had made for his

1997 film *Good Will Hunting*, which was itself, Van Sant's watercolor, a reproduction of a Winslow Homer painting, *Lost on the Grand Banks* (1885). (If you'll recall, *I Am Abandoned* also reproduced a painting from the Western canon.) In *Good Will Hunting*, this Homer watercolor is supposed to be a piece of art therapy that the sad widowed therapist Sean Maguire (Robin Williams) has made. It's a prop in his therapy office. Among the props in the therapy office that Hilvers staged were two other paintings: one, a reproduction of a still from *Good Will Hunting* of Maguire's office with the Homer watercolor in it, and two, a painting of a drawing of a clock that a doctor had prompted Hilvers' late father to make. (Drawing a clock is a common diagnostic tool for dementia.⁵¹ Hilvers' father had drawn a 1, 2, and 3 inside of a circle, and 4 and 5 outside of it, along with a few additional squiggles.⁵²) The free therapy sessions booked up fast, with Hilvers advertising himself as having sixteen years experience, "within various networks of service, supporting mental health, addiction recovery, post-incarceration employment, stable housing, creative consulting and career-building guidance."⁵³ With *The Foster-Rose Method*, Hilvers said he wanted to demonstrate how "listening is one of the most undervalued skills and services" and how essential both it and universal healthcare are. He viewed the creation of his paintings as "volunteer labor" that, traded upon, could afford time to offer these "free" sessions. Mental healthcare as mutual aid. The premise revealed the discrepancies between what's valued within contemporary capitalism and the art world. Paintings sell, performance doesn't. Objects are worth investing in, not subjects, not people.

Who doesn't feel abandoned now? If not by a specific person, local institution, or workplace, then by the state, world leaders, the myth of democracy, or the hoards of people online saying awful things all the time? *Who are they?* At least some of them are bots⁵⁴(cop bots)⁵⁵(fake accounts).⁵⁶Social media is literally dehumanizing, leading to "dead Internet theory," which proposes that A.I. bots will (or maybe they have already) drown out human users on social media.⁵⁷Perhaps that will bore us, free us. Or perhaps that will further ensnare and entertain us. Given how little democratic oversight and regulation there is of big tech, and given who owns and scripts it, I don't imagine much will change actually; as Smith said, there's "a built in problem," and this is "only a new example." Then again, maybe I'm not giving enough credence to "the imminent A.I. apocalypse" that Webster warned me about over dinner the other night. She was sent a Lacanian A.I. chatbot to play with. "It's very good," she said.⁵⁸

Before *I Am Abandoned*, Barbara T. Smith made a field of grass. *Field Piece* consisted of 180 tubular blades of translucent resin "grass,"⁵⁹each 9 ½ feet tall, installed on a spongy floor, beneath which were electrical components that triggered light and sound when stepped upon.⁶⁰Humans were invited to walk through *Field Piece* barefoot. The ground was squishy, the grass dwarfed them, turning them into insects, or dirt. In immersion, proportion, and materials, *Field Piece* was not unlike Yayoi Kusama's *Phalli's Field* (1965) or LACMA's future permanent installation, *Urban Light*, a plot of antique street lamps assembled in 2008 by Chris Burden,⁶¹who first met Smith while she was making *Field Piece*. But where Burden's *Urban Light* is hard and invulnerable, like most urban infrastructure, and Kusama's

infinite, dizzying, venereally-diseased *Phalli's Field* untouchable, except by the artist, *Field Piece* was designed with tactile sensuality in mind. Install shots show visitors pawing at the electric blades, summoning Walt Whitman's worshipful "body electric" from his 1855 collection *Leaves of Grass*, and foreseeing a meme of untraceable origins—because it's common knowledge that dirt is healing—"touch grass," words of advice shared when someone seems painfully screen-addled: anxious, angry, numb, depressed... 62

"It was sensuous in nature, hypnotic, and meditative," Smith wrote of *Field Piece*. "Its intent was spiritual warmth."⁶³ Smith had actually pitched *Field Piece* to LACMA's Art and Technology (A&T) initiative in the late sixties, but was rejected. Three years later, she'd learn that A&T only featured white male artists. A year after that, she'd complete *Field Piece*, having financed the thing herself. To do so, she had to liquidate her stock portfolio; sell the house she'd inherited in her divorce; work miscellaneous gigs; take out loans; and accept donations. \$40,000 later (approx. \$350,000 today), *Field Piece* was exhibited in 1972 in a Long Beach group show, where a part of it was destroyed by vandals. With no money left to store this giant immersive sculpture that no one wanted to buy, Smith tried selling the blades of grass off one by one for \$40 (approx. \$350) each. She titled that performance *Dispersal*.

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Like You Know Me (Bierke Books, 2023). Duncan is a member of the late Pippa Garner's estate and the founder of Hard to Read, a literary social practice.

Notes

1. Jack Miles, "David Smith, 67; Founder of Caltech's Baxter Art Gallery," *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 2, 1990. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1990-09-02-mn-2086-story.html>.
2. Jack Miles, author of *God: A Biography* (1995), winner of the 1996 Pulitzer Prize for Biography, was the [literary editor of the Los Angeles Times](#) circa 1990 when Smith died. I submitted a request to the "Contact Jack Miles" form on his website to confirm whether he did indeed write Smith's obit but never heard back, so let's just say it's very likely.
3. Barbara T. Smith, "Barbara T. Smith: Chronology of Works," in *The Way to Be* (Getty Research Institute, 2023), p. 269-274.
4. "With a new exhibition and memoir—" the dek of this Getty announcement proclaims—"a trailblazing California performance artist gets her due." Although I doubt the author of the article wrote that dek (usually it's editorial), here's the source: Anya Ventura, "The Incredible Journey of Barbara T. Smith," *Getty*, Feb. 27, 2023. <https://www.getty.edu/news/the-incredible-journey-of-barbara-t-smith/>.
6. Barbara T. Smith, *I Am Abandoned*, Transcript, 1976, Printed text. Image courtesy of the artist and The Box LA.
7. Perhaps his *L.A. Times* obit should've been included.
8. Barbara T. Smith, "Artist Statement," in *I Am Abandoned* (Primary Information, 2025), p. 7.
9. Barbara T. Smith on Goya for LACMA: https://youtu.be/kAFfFfhYI_w?si=gjEoez8A4cEqVnTn
10. Barbara T. Smith, "Artist Statement," *I Am Abandoned*, p. 9.
11. David Scharf "displayed [several photographic works](#)" and there might've been a Jean Tinguely. Other participating artists included "computer and machine generated art holograms and other optical effects." (*I Am Abandoned*, p. 13).
12. Barbara T. Smith, "Artist Statement," *I Am Abandoned*, p. 9.
13. Joel Epstein and William D. Klinkenberg, "From Eliza to Internet: A Brief History of Computerized Assessment," in *Computers in Human Behavior* 17, no. 3 (2001): 295–314. As quoted in Hannah Zeavin's [The Distance Cure: A History of Teletherapy](#) (MIT Press, 2021).
14. Barbara T. Smith, "Performance Transcript," in *I Am Abandoned* (Primary Information, 2025), p. 45-50.
15. I love this moment because it exhibits a flirting 101 tactic: mirroring. *Do you kiss me? / You like to think I kiss you, don't you? / You bet. / Oh? I bet?* That's flirting! (Barbara T. Smith, "Performance Transcript," *I Am Abandoned*, p. 110-11).
16. Barbara T. Smith, *Feed Me*, 1973, line up. Image courtesy of the artist.
17. Barbara T. Smith, *The Way to Be* (Getty Research Institute, 2023), p. 122.
18. Barbara T. Smith, *The Way to Be*, p. 36.

19. Barbara T. Smith, *The Way to Be*, p. 27.
20. Barbara T. Smith, *The Way to Be*, p. 140.
21. See: Catherine Wagley, "Closed Circuits: A Look Back at LACMA's First Art and Technology Initiative," , May 11, 2015. <https://eastofborneo.org/articles/closed-circuits-a-look-back-at-lacmas-first-art-and-technology-initiative/>.
22. Peter Lunenfeld, "Art and Technology," *Artforum* 54, no. 1 (September 2015). <https://www.artforum.com/columns/art-and-technology-2-225373/>.
23. Barbara T. Smith, "Selected Documentation and Ephemera," in *I Am Abandoned* (Primary Information, 2025), p. 131.
24. Barbara T. Smith, "Performance Transcript," in *I Am Abandoned* (Primary Information, 2025), p. 51-52.
25. The choice of an apple for a Turing test is interesting given that Alan Turing, a mathematician said to be the father of A.I., committed suicide by biting into a cyanide-laced apple in 1954. 22 years later, in 1976, the same year that *I Am Abandoned* was performed, Apple Computers was founded. Its first logo featured Isaac Newton being bonked by an apple under a tree, a clunky image that was replaced, a year later, by a rainbow-filled apple with a bite taken out of it. I recently met a man who claimed to have done branding with Apple during its early 21st century takeover; meeting with Steve Jobs weekly, he came up with those colorful silhouette iPod ads... This man told me that the Apple logo is a reference to the apple of knowledge that Eve sampled in the Garden of Eden, a trespass associated with a knowledge of sex, which women have been punished for for millenia, and not Alan Turing's suicide apple, as is sometimes speculated. Prior to his suicide, Turing was chemically castrated following a conviction for "homosexual acts." He too was a forbidden fruit.
26. Barbara T. Smith, "Performance Transcript," in *I Am Abandoned* (Primary Information, 2025), p. 85, 91.
27. Barbara T. Smith, "Performance Transcript," in *I Am Abandoned* (Primary Information, 2025), p. 109-110.
28. Kelly Flynn, "Danni's hard drive to adult content success," *CNN* (October 21, 2000). <https://edition.cnn.com/2000/TECH/computing/10/21/index.ashe/cover.ashe/#:~:text=Technologically%2C%20adult%20sites%20on%20the,for%20people%2C%22%20says%20Ashe.>
29. Eric Schmidt, "The Tinkerer's Apprentice," *Project Syndicate* (January 19, 2015). <https://www.project-syndicate.org/magazine/google-european-commission-and-disruptive-technological-change-by-eric-schmidt-2015-01#yMSC5IY7sHATDCO.99>.
30. Rob Sheffield, "How Nipplegate Created YouTube," *Rolling Stone* (February 11, 2020). <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/youtube-origin-nipplegate-janet-jackson-justin-timberlake-949019/>.
31. In Spike Jonze's 2013 film *Her*, Joaquin Phoenix's character falls in love with an A.I. bot voiced by Scarlett Johansson who breaks his heart when she comes out as non-monogamous.
32. In David Cronenberg's most recent film *The Shrouds* (2024), the recently widowed Vincent Cassel character has an animated A.I. assistant named Honey who looks like his

late wife, played by the immaculate Diane Kruger. At one point, Honey transforms into a koala bear.

[33.](#) For his 2010s series of “New Portraits,” Richard Prince printed screenshots of Instagram posts that he’d commented on onto canvas. Some of my friends, like Sybil Prentice aka nitecoregirl, a very talented DJ and hot girl, were captured by Prince. Captured... Prince mostly reproduced posts by hot girls but he threw some hot they/thems and he/hims into the mix. Kate Moss, Karley Sciortino, Emrata, Ian Isiah... In 2022, I knocked on Prince’s front door hoping to invite him to an event on consent where he would discuss this project and his thoughts on consent re: appropriation-based art. I had tried to reach out through the traditional means, through his galleries, via e-mail, but when I didn’t hear back, I decided to go analog. I happened to know where Prince lived—just a few blocks from my own home on the Upper East Side—and so one evening, the artist Amalia Ulman and I rang the bell of what we were told was Richard Prince’s home studio (no answer) and then we knocked on his home’s front door. His wife answered, she was not pleased, I felt horrible about implicating her in my little troll, offered a stilted apology, and watched the door slam in my face. Bothering celebrities and invading people’s privacy is not usually my M.O. But with Richard Prince, I felt entitled to troll him because he’d done the same to girls from my bubble. Here’s an exhibition link with a great picture of

Sybil: <https://gagosian.com/exhibitions/2014/richard-prince-new-portraits/>

[34.](#) Barbara T. Smith, “Artist Statement,” *I Am Abandoned* (Primary Information, 2025), p. 8.

[35.](#) Barbara T. Smith, *The Way to Be* (Getty Research Institute, 2023), p. 157.

[36.](#) Barbara T. Smith tells this story in this video produced by the Getty. (*The Way To Be: Barbara T. Smith's Art of Transformation*, 2023)

[37.](#) Barbara T. Smith, *The Way to Be* (Getty Research Institute, 2023), p. 4.

[38.](#) Barbara T. Smith, *The Way to Be*, p. 186.

[39.](#) Clip of *Wanda* (1970), directed by Barbara Loden.

[40.](#) Clip of *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974), directed by John Cassavetes.

[41.](#) “Three Approaches to Psychotherapy,” or “The Gloria Films” (1965), directed by Dr. Everett L. Shostrom.

[42.](#) Hamishi Farah, *Untitled*, 2025. Image courtesy of the artist, Maxwell Graham, New York, and Arcadia Missa, London.

[43.](#) Amalia Ulman, [Excellences & Perfections](#) (2014). Courtesy of the artist and Deborah Schamoni.

[44.](#) Ariana Reines, [The Origin of the World](#), July 2012. Performance at Stuart Shave Modern Art. Film documentation by Ingham Brooke Studio.

[45.](#) Ariana Reines, [Divine Justice](#), July 11-12, 2022. Performance at Performance Space, New York.

[46.](#) Ariana Reines, *Mortal Kombat*, October 16, 2014. Performance at The Whitney Museum of Art, New York. Photo by Paula Court.

[47.](#) Trailer for *Sick! The Psychoanalytic Field Hospital* (2018).

[48.](#) Vanessa Place, “Act One: Litany of Self-Loathing,” *Sick!* (2018). <https://alt-projects.com/images/sick/playbill.pdf>.

49. Matt Hilvers, *The Foster-Rose Method*, September 10–September 30, 2024, at The Frame, New York. https://www.instagram.com/p/C_f9gsKRp2m/.
50. For Alissa Bennet's 2024 exhibition "[The Secret History](#)" at Gladstone Gallery, Hilvers made another Western canon reproduction, *Copy_edit_master_file (whom is being worshipped? Whom is working? 2011 Poussin vandalism sparks museum fee debate)* (2024), a replica of Nicolas Poussin's *The Adoration of the Golden Calf* as vandalized at the National Gallery in London in 2011.
51. Esther Heerema, "How the Clock-Drawing Test Screens for Dementia," *Verywell Health* (May 26, 2025). <https://www.verywellhealth.com/the-clock-drawing-test-98619>.
52. Matt Hilvers, "*My father was never an artist, but it seemed fitting that a drawing would be the final test of his life to determine mental cognition.*", 2024. Oil on canvas. 12 x 15 in. The Frame, New York. Courtesy of the artist and The Frame NYC.
53. Matt Hilvers, *The Foster-Rose Method*, website: <https://www.fosterrosemethod.com/>
54. Emma Woollacott, "Yes, The Bots Really Are Taking Over The Internet," *Forbes* (April 16, 2024). <https://www.forbes.com/sites/emmawoollacott/2024/04/16/yes-the-bots-really-are-taking-over-the-internet/>.
55. Jason Koebler and Emanuel Maiberg, "This 'College Protester' Isn't Real. It's an AI-Powered Undercover Bot for Cops," *Wired* (April 17, 2025). <https://www.wired.com/story/massive-blue-overwatch-ai-personas-police-suspects/>.
56. Io Dodds, "Elon Musk admits he has two burner Twitter accounts in bizarre, popcorn-worthy libel deposition," *Independent* (April 10, 2024). <https://www.the-independent.com/tech/elon-musk-deposition-twitter-burner-accounts-b2526018.html>
57. Prathamesh Muzumdar with Sumanth Cheemalapati, Srikanth Reddy RamiReddy, Kuldeep Singh, George Kurianm, and Apoorva Muley, "The Dead Internet Theory: A Survey on Artificial Interactions and the Future of Social Media," *Asian Journal of Research in Computer Science* 18, no. 1 (June 1, 2025), pp. 67–73. <https://arxiv.org/pdf/2502.00007>.
58. Although it's tempting to speculate on the future and A.I., I'm resisting doing it here as I'll date myself quickly; the technology is evolving fast.
59. Installation view, "Barbara T. Smith: Proof," Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, October 7, 2023–January 14, 2024. Photo: Jeff McLane/ICA LA.
60. Barbara T. Smith, *Field Piece*, 1972.
61. Chris Burden, *Urban Light*, 2008. Photo credit: @majamalnar.
62. Lisa Marshall, "Why dirt may be nature's original stress-buster," *CU Boulder Today* (Sept. 28, 2018). <https://www.colorado.edu/today/2019/05/09/natures-original-stress-buster#:~:text=Integrative%20Physiology%20Professor%20Christopher%20Lowry,rates%20of%20stress%2Drelated%20disease>.
63. Barbara T. Smith, *The Way to Be* (Getty Research Institute, 2023), p. 82.