

The Best Art Books of 2025

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Barbara T. Smith's *I Am Abandoned*

(Primary Information, 2025)

Recently, a friend told me about the burgeoning of adolescent girls who develop parasocial romantic relationships with their AI chatbots. AI, they reasoned, lent a much more sympathetic ear to their problems than the oblivious boys who roamed the halls of their high schools. Having never used ChatGPT in my life, I was perplexed, but not necessarily repulsed: I remember girls of my own generation turning toward slightly different online platforms (Tumblr, AO3) for very similar reasons.

Like a digital-era Cassandra, artist Barbara T. Smith portended this phenomenon by almost fifty years. In her 1976 performance *I Am Abandoned*, which was featured in the California Institute of Technology (Caltech) exhibition *The Many Arts and Sciences*, Smith staged a dialogue between two early chatbots: DOCTOR, a surrogate therapist, and PARRY, a paranoid schizophrenic. Viewers were invited to interact with them as well. They approached the chatbots with cautious flirtation—one wrote, “I love the style and verve of your conversation.” This sexual tension escalated when Smith and her team deliberately attempted to “seduce” the doctor. Pivoting toward the philosophical, they asked, “Do people really fuck another or do they fuck the image of another in their minds?”

In Primary Information's eponymous book, these transcripts are brought together with other performance ephemera. Most notable is an aggrieved letter that Barbara T. Smith wrote to David Smith, Director of Caltech's Baxter Art Gallery, who abruptly cut the performance short by terminating power to the computer terminal. David Smith felt that Barbara T. Smith and her engineers were too “noisy” and disrupted viewers' engagement with the more traditional works on view. Barbara T. Smith pushed back: not only was she “pissed,” but she felt like she was not *heard*. I can't help but hear in her letter echoes of those girls who, decades later, would trade in heteropessimism for techno-ambivalence by shirking men for machines.

—Elizabeth Wiet