A gas tank stands in the desert. It is abandoned, and its surroundings are empty. Some bushes and behind them mountains form the background, but the gas tank itself is encompassed by nothing but sand. One the right, tire tracks extend from the background and disappear into the lower right edge of the image. The gas tank stands upright, as if it was left there intentionally.
This photograph presents one of Robert Barry’s *Inert Gas* pieces. In March 1969, the artist went to the Mojave Desert and released two cubic feet of helium into the atmosphere. The gas was left to dissipate in the air “from a measured volume to indefinite expansion.”¹ In histories of conceptual art, the work holds an eponymous position. It is believed to epitomize conceptual art’s dictum of dematerialization: in its invisibility, the object seems to be completely discarded and one can only relate to the infinite expansion of the gas on a conceptual level. To a large degree, the reception of Robert Barry as a protagonist of conceptual art revolves around the challenges this work poses to the object and visibility as conditions for visual art.

In this paper, I will track how the evolution of Robert Barry’s artistic production in the 1960s lead to this state of utter invisibility. I will frame this examination within a broader equation of object, body, and space as essential aspects of the spectator’s confrontation with the pieces. Barry’s work, as Alexander Alberro reports, was complexly related to the 1960s revision of author-viewer-object relationships in which “meaning came to be holistically constituted by the triad of object, site, and spectator.”² Through the *Inert Gas Series*’ dismantling of the object, the triad seems to be unhinged, raising questions about how the role of both site and spectator change under varying conditions of imperceptibility.

**A Minimalist Legacy**

In a discussion with René Denizot, Barry describes his work as “to totally involve the viewer, and [...] to get into the real world, [...] the world in which

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¹ The complete announcement for the show read: “Robert Barry / Inert Gas Series / Helium, Neon, Argon, Krypton, Xenon / From a Measured Volume to Indefinite Expansion / April 1969 / Seth Siegelaub, 6000 Sunset Boulevard, Hollywood, California, 90028 / 213 HO 4-8383.”

the work of art is articulated, in which it is situated.” These terms are especially reminiscent of the vocabulary of minimal art. Rooted in the phenomenological theories of French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, this predecessor of conceptual art was particularly invested with the changing perception of gestalt objects as one moved through space. Merleau-Ponty’s claim that “what I perceive is necessarily dependent on my being at any moment physically present in a matrix of circumstances,” was most pointedly reiterated by Robert Morris as “the known constant” versus “the experienced variable.” Accordingly, Robert Barry admitted to Arthur Rose that his early paintings looked one way in one place yet differently in another, appearing as two different works altogether.

Minimalism’s phenomenological considerations became explicit themes in Barry’s work produced during 1967. At a show held in 1968 at the Laura Knott Gallery of Bradford Junior College in Haverhill, Massachusetts, a green monochrome was mounted just inches above the floor. It denied the viewer any centralized viewpoint and changed in appearance as the viewer walked by with a downward cast look, or as he squatted in front of it. Four modest yellow squares adorned another wall of the gallery. As a system, they formed the four corners of a larger, virtual square. When the work was installed elsewhere, the distance between the four canvases would change according to the wall on and the space in which it appeared. Not only does the field or situation influence the perception of the work as in Minimalism, but here, these factors also determine its form. Moreover, the work articulates the mutual space between itself and the viewer. Its fragmentation into four biaxially installed units focuses attention not on the paintings themselves but on the empty space between them. Instead of disappearing

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behind the canvas, the wall thus becomes an integral part of the work. The viewer’s space is incorporated into the piece, in its turn positioning the work in that particular space. While the piece still attests to a formalist objecthood, its primary output consists of the phenomenological experience of the empty space surrounding it.

In the following years, Barry extrapolated his quadripartite paintings into a three-dimensional, sculptural situation. The artist positioned four cubic boxes at specific intervals, delineating a square. Later, he placed these cubes in the corners of their architectural container. Once again, the site constitutes a decisive force in the formalist characteristics of the work, as evidenced by the notation “materials, size of cubes and square determined by site.”

Barry’s sculptures refer even more strongly to the Minimalist tradition than the paintings. Cubic forms were highly popular in Minimalist sculpture—think of Larry Bell’s cubes, Tony Smith’s Die (1962) or Robert Morris’s Mirrored Cubes (1965). Since the inherent structure of a cube is dull and obvious—uneventful, Claire Bishop would say—the contingent character of its perception becomes all the more apparent. In Barry’s work, the cubes are not only positioned directly inside the viewer’s space, they also delineate a space. Consequently, the spectator does not walk around the piece—as was common in a lot of Minimal sculpture—as much as through it, his body now physically penetrating the work. Yet, what most differentiates Barry’s work from Minimalism’s emblematic cube pieces is that the perception of the spaces between the cubes, more so than that of the cubes themselves, are what constitute its primary subject matter. Rather than the space being a viewing device through which to perceive the work, the work here functions as a viewing device through which to become (physically) aware of the space. The phenomenological experience of the objects thus serves an

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examination of how we perceive space. By focusing on the emptiness between the boundaries, ‘space’ is materialized and becomes ‘place’.

**The Perception of Space**

In Barry’s subsequent *Wire Pieces*, and most notoriously in the “untitled” installation at Windham College in 1968, a similar demarcation of virtual space is accomplished, with far less material. In Putney, Vermont, four nylon monofilaments were stretched between the library and the student union building of Windham College. In much the same way as Fred Sandback’s yarn sculptures, Barry’s nylon cords suggest a surface. In the diagram of the installation, they appear to frame the emptiness encapsulated by the buildings on the one hand, and the ground and sky on the other. This roof-like demarcation raises the viewer’s awareness of moving through or penetrating a virtual body of space. The diagram also maps the extent to which the installation of the wires depends on the location and orientation of the buildings. Thus, the site’s status as a determining parameter of the work is again made evident.

Additionally, the reduction of the work’s material substance to a mere four wires of each 1/8” wide led to a growing emphasis on the role of the spectator in the perception of space. First, because it is composed of nylon cords, the perception of the work was not only contingent but also dependent upon such parameters as lighting and the position of the viewer. Barely discernible in the photographs, the wires appear transparent at some points and clearly perceptible at others. Not only *how* the viewer saw the sculptural object now depended on his position, but *if* he saw it at all! So, the relationship between the work’s actual existence and the viewer’s perception became skewed. What’s more, the near invisibility of the work raises questions concerning the nature of the spatial perception. That there
is no absolute delineation to speak of and that the object itself appears so ephemeral suggests that there is more to it than the visually oriented phenomenological encounter of minimal art. In the words of John Paoletti, “perception changed not because of any physical transformation of the actual landscape, but because a frame (sometimes) visible overhead suggested the possibility of an inside and an outside, even if no boundary between the two could be visually fixed.” What resided in the emptiness and near invisibility of the piece was the possibility for the viewer to conjure the space in his own terms. Emptiness and invisibility thus represent a degree of potentiality.

The most poetic examination of the spectator’s role in the perception of space and the notion of potentiality, however, can be found in one of Barry’s lesser known works. The artist’s contribution to the sixth issue of Vito Acconci’s 0-9 magazine, published in 1969, consisted of “the space between pages 29 and 30” and “the space between pages 74 and 75.” Whereas the first is determined by the paper itself, the second is wholly determined by the spectator who can choose to open page 74 and 75 to any degree between 0° and 360°. But this physical determination of the space is not absolute. First, it is only a temporal situation; more importantly, its perception depends upon the reader’s concept or understanding of the space between two pages. Do readers, for example, only consider the space within the book’s arc, or do they conceive of it as a column of space emanating from the page, as Carl Andre did? Therefore, the perception of space is contingent on the perceiver as a corporeally active as well as a cognitive being.

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8 John Paoletti, ”Spaces Liberated for Thought,” in Some places to which we can come, and for a while “be free to think about what we are going to do,” edited by Ellen Seifermann and Beat Wismer (Bielefeld: Karl Kerber Verlag, 2003), 29.
The Perception of Emptiness

Robert Barry’s various wave pieces of 1968 and 1969—*Carrier Wave Pieces, Radiowave Pieces,* and *Ultrasonic Soundwave Pieces*—present an interesting elaboration on the spatial delineation works. The wire pieces had piqued Barry’s interest in the possibility of a concrete existence that was beyond the reach of human perception. The wave installations accomplished just that, expanding the object to a dynamic process on the one hand and reducing it to sheer invisibility on the other. The wave pieces were devoid of all visual data—documentary photographs show nothing more than empty rooms—and there was nothing to hear, feel or taste either. Yet, hidden transmitters filled the exhibition space with AM waves, FM waves or ultrasonic sounds. “These forms certainly do exist,” Barry assured Arthur Rose in 1969, “they are controlled and have their own characteristics.” They could bounce off of walls, for example, and be enclosed in a room. The form of the waves was affected by the presence and movement of people, whose bodies are themselves electromagnetic sources.

Although the ‘object’ is imperceptible through ordinary sensory means, its actual form is explicitly dependent on the viewer’s physical presence. Just as space already was in the earlier works, here the viewer becomes a constitutive parameter of the work’s physical form. The interactions between perceiving body, material structure and architectural surround are therefore enhanced to an almost viscerally phenomenological one. But while this interaction is extended to the physical constitution of the work, it is removed from the perceiver’s conscious experience. Their awareness of the phenomenological relation between their own body and the work remains conceptual at most. No one can see the waves or the body’s influence on them; one can only assume that they are there by the descriptive title of the work. As the visual dimension of the work is completely discarded, the bodily

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and cognitive aspects of the viewer’s perception of space are pulled apart. In perception’s balancing act of experiential and cognitive factors, the cognitive here has the upper hand. “Even if there is nothing to see,” Robert Morgan summarized, “the receiver is engaged in thinking about what is there and then somehow formulating a response.”  

The disjunction between reality and knowledge on the one hand and perception on the other, calls attention to the nature of the space as ‘filled’, even if it looks empty.

In the notorious 1969 *Inert Gas Series*, Barry similarly questions the nature and emptiness of space. The series consists of five works and excludes all visual data, including the need for a transmitter. On several days in early March, Robert Barry travelled to five outdoor locations in southern California, from Beverly Hills to the Tehachapi Mountains and the Mojave Desert. At each location, he set free varying amounts of different noble gases. The infinite expansion of the gases in the atmosphere—“from a measured volume to indefinite expansion”—constitutes the work; a process that is imperceptible, never-ending and barely graspable even in theoretical models. Because of this invisible but extant materiality of the work, as well as its invisible process of development, the *Inert Gas Series* is customarily mentioned alongside the various wave pieces. Because of the emphasis on invisibility, however, their differences are often overlooked. First of all, the gases in *Inert Gas Series* are released in an outdoor space without boundaries and it is their expansion within this space—the atmosphere—that is emphasized. The piece did not ‘stay’ in its initial location. In this sense, the *Inert Gas Series* also works in opposition to the earlier demarcation pieces. Instead of delineating space—be it primarily physically or conceptually—it concentrates on its fluidity, on the atmosphere as a vast body of space that surrounds and connects us all.

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Secondly, another aspect that sets *Inert Gas Series* apart from the wave pieces is its mode of presentation. Here, the viewer and work are no longer present in the same time and place. *Inert Gas Series* was exhibited in the form of documentary information in art galleries and publications. The descriptions of the locations were vague, stating that "somewhere in the Mojave Desert in California, 2 cubic feet of Helium was returned to the atmosphere," so that it was hardly conceivable for the viewer to visit the piece. Moreover, the *Inert Gas* pieces were never ‘restaged’. The release happened only once, sometime in early March 1969. This distance between viewer and work, if not in space then certainly in time, seemingly short-circuits any phenomenological involvement and undermines the role of the spectator as an embodied being. The *Inert Gas Series* not only seems to remove the object from the equation, as I stated in the beginning of this paper, but the site and the embodied spectator as well.

Originally, the presentation of the work consisted of verbal descriptions alone. These remained intentionally vague and emphasized the indefinite expansion of the gas. It was impossible to know exactly how the gas would expand, so that the work presented a situation of utter potentiality. It allowed the viewer to imagine a molecule of the gas to be present in his own space and time; he was able to project the work onto himself. Pretty soon, however, photographs of open or broken containers in the landscape were added to the exhibited documentation. It is primarily through this photographic documentation that the work has come to be known. Barry took these photographs as a way of showing that there was nothing to show, as proof of the work’s invisibility. Yet, due to this photographic documentation, the emphasis shifts from the indefinite process of expansion in time and space to the actual moment and event of release. The vagueness and conceptual potentiality of the verbal description is undermined by the documentary evidence represented by the photograph.
Instead of “somewhere in the Mojave Desert”, the exact location is photographed, while the existence of the photograph itself shows that someone was there to document and experience it. The photographs function as a trace of bodily presence and the viewer can only project him or herself into that moment. The roles of body and space still linger in the work, yet as little more than a memory.

**Conclusion**

Reviewing Robert Barry’s practice of the mid-to late 1960s, it becomes evident that the artist had a predilection towards the idea of looking at space and how this could be influenced by the perceiving subject. Such phenomenological perceptions of space, particularly as they are illustrated by the 0-9 piece, emerge as a function of both bodily and cognitive factors. The former resides in an actual encounter between the corporeal perceiver and a material object. Initially, this relation was understood as a visual one. The latter involves a conceptual understanding and resides—at least in Barry’s work—in the emptiness. “Why the void and not the created space? [...] Nothing seems to me the most potent thing in the world,” Barry explained. By incorporating emptiness as a condition in his work, Barry left room for the perceiver. The incessant dialogue between void and viewer thus initiates a phenomenological state of awareness of one’s own perceiving role not only in visual terms, but on a conceptual, interpretative level as well.

In the artworks discussed in this paper, the object is progressively removed. Or, at least, its visual or perceptual aspects are downplayed. Whereas minimal art tended to keep a clear balance between the roles of object, spectator and site, Barry unhinges this balance through the

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Degradation of one or more of its factors. As the ‘objects’ in Barry’s work move from canvases to virtually imperceptible nylon wires, then to invisible but extant waves and energies, space and spectator become determining factors of the work. At the same time, the object’s apparent degradation initiates a transfer of the spectator’s involvement from a bodily to a primarily conceptual one. Despite appearances and popular belief, however, matter and material are always at play in Barry’s artistic production, although one may need to replace the term ‘object’ with ‘energies’.

Nonetheless, the *Wave Pieces* and *Inert Gas Series* are traditionally combined under the umbrella term of dematerialization. But where the *Wave Pieces* depend on both spatial and bodily interference in their constitution as well as cognitive interference in their perception, *Inert Gas Series* denies an assured physical interaction with the viewer’s body and space. Instead, the innate forces of the gas are foregrounded as the determining morphological and structural aspects of the work. The site’s and embodied spectator’s involvement is reduced to an extreme low, first to a potential encounter with the work, then to a mere trace of a happening. But while the balance is disturbed, none of the three aspects governing one’s confrontation with an artwork are ever completely removed, not even the object. Despite some heavy blows, the work continues to be holistically constituted through the triad of object, site, and spectator.