

AIDEEN BARRY
FLIGHT FOLLY

APRIL



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If there's one thing that immediately, and thereafter consistently, springs to mind with the practice of Aideen Barry, it might be her apparent desire to defy the earth's most basic natural law, gravity. This significant metaphor in her performance-driven practice has manifested itself in her illusions of levitation, in such works as her aptly titled 2007 film, *Levitating*, and (perhaps anecdotally most compelling) in her experimentations with zero gravity while undertaking astronaut training at NASA, Kennedy Space Centre – now there's something that not everybody can say without blatant lying or overplaying chat-up lines.

In 2010, Barry was invited to participate in the performance project for LISTE 15, Basel, where she formulated a new work, *Flight Folly*¹, and which she subsequently re-staged to an invited audience for *mother's tankstation*. This complex work combines her central and essentially escapist signifier of a freedom from the fetters of earthly things, conflated with the knowing distraction of performance as spectacle, and/or the novelty (air)show, common to the world of expos and trade fairs throughout the anticipatory and formative years of modernity. From early dirigibles to Red Arrow's fly-bys and aerobatic displays of the newest fighter jets and stealth bombers, this is the stuff of octane-breathing, danger-driven, theatrical display, and Barry's underlying sense of comedy and institutional critique is clear in the respect of her underscoring the annual Basel art event for exactly what it actually is, a trade fair.

In *Flight Folly*, Barry combines the language of a show-off, technological marvel and the theatricalised suspense of a professional illusionist with the simplest narrative reveal of the artist as real-world documentarian, designed to pique expectation with the inevitable (deflationary) reality of a return to the everyday – the gravitas of a coming back down to earth. Questions themselves seem to levitate; will it work (artistically), will it fly (practically), will there be a flash of knickers (lowest common-denominational curiosity), will it fail or will anyone be hurt in the process (human interestedly)? All of which fuels our fascination with both real-life, disaster-type events, in the sense of 'rubber-necking', as well as the contemporary phenomenon of reality TV, which seemingly formalises this noble trait within us. None of this escapes Barry in her bundled intent; the orchestrated show, the spectacle (eventism), the cheap-thrill (the vague suggestion of flashing), the soap opera (continuing drama), and the metaphors of control and its inevitable loss (crashing and burning / daily reality).

The construct of Aideen Barry's finely-wrought ten-minute performance thus takes all these aspects as ingredients and creates a knife-edge balance of anticipation and expectation, alongside the introduction of references to mediated memory and childlike wonderment, filmicly slapstick humour, as well as the ludic and foolhardy. In all sorts of ways *Flight Folly* presses the buttons of the completely absurd, it is frankly dangerous, and an extraordinary endeavour intended to achieve the slightest possible outcome. Beyond the obvious narrative of sixteen remote control helicopters being employed to lift an enormous skirt, the work of course poses broader questions; namely the role of logic, normalcy, certainty, reliability in our daily world, standing against the more challenging and darker personal or physiological forces of anxiety, fear and uncertainty. Worse than performing with children or animals, the piece has chosen a meaningful dependency upon the potential unreliability of the human-control of dangerous machines (issuing forth the potent frailty of 'human error'). The artist holds the centralised controls of the helicopters as well as being the visual/physical epicentre of the 'sculpture', all of which is operated in a confined and packed, public space. The ludic and the not-insignificant danger present in *Flight Folly*, are of course also central to the unwritten codes of performative practice; from Roman Signer's pyromaniacal fascination with blowing otherwise harmless things up, to Marina Abramovic's apparent self-hurting or threat of such. The visual tension of which might be epitomised by an early work such as *Rest-*

*Energy*², where Abramovic and a performing companion lean backwards while facing each other, holding an archer's bow in optimum tension between them, with an arrow head positioned towards the artist's heart. One distracted slip by either performer and the result would have been newspaper headlines, art becomes reality (or at least reality TV).

Looking glamorous, gothic and gracious – more than Roman Signer has ever managed – at the helm of her performance, Barry not only centred in the gallery space is also very much centred in and by her vast 'dress' and surrounded by the potential of self-inflicted harm. The theatrical 'dress' is posited part-ways between wedding gown, parachute³ and Marilyn Monroe's iconic billowing, silk meringue, from the 1954 movie *The Seven Year Itch* – you know what happened to that. Attached to the dress are the sixteen buzzing, remote-controlled helicopters, in anticipation of 'lift-off'. With her hand on the remote control of her own destiny, Barry balances motion and stasis, poised and statuesque, secure in inactivity, she stands at the threshold of an unknown outcome, a physical updraft and a bitter-sweet excitement tinged with the fear of the unknown. As soon as the rota blades gutter into life the audience tension increases in relative proportion. Similarly, the greater the speed the more the model helicopters rise, but the greater challenge issued to the centre of gravity, Barry's balance and statuesque poise (under her own control) is increasingly compromised, resulting in a paradoxical equation of the more 'control' executed the less control there is over that controlled. The artist holds the power of her own potential and inevitable collapse, and the dalliance with the inevitable feels a little like a musician enjoying his/her own virtuosity or a cat joyfully tossing a mouse, playing with its prey before finally and inevitably eating it. We know what is about to happen but perhaps not how it will occur. Barry, perhaps forging a comment on all artistic practice, revels in being both in and out of control, she is subtly interdependent on the ambient atmospherics; the way the wind blows, even upon the movement and reaction of the audience.

Moving beyond the fragility of a live event and reviewing a few short minutes from the distance of a few months, it seems more possible to apply a formal, aesthetic appreciation of the work as 'sculpture' that hardly seemed appropriate during the tense moments of the performance: the soft tonalities, Barry's jet-black hair and pale skin against fragile white silk, the huge, billowing diameter of the segmented circular dress, the lightness and delicacy of the structure of the outer hoops, and the smaller, whirring, hovering, lifting, falling, soft white circles created by the rotary-blades. All these amassed translucent tones seem pointedly precious in their vulnerability when set against the violent noise of machines, the hard polished concrete and resolute wall-painted greys.

The poetics of visual ballet ceased in an instant, with noisy drama and violent clatter of breaking and falling things. Its conclusion orchestrated as the artist manoeuvred the height and lift of the remote controlled models to and beyond the limits of their, and her, control. The helicopters may not, nor were ever intended to lift the artist from the ground – this perhaps seems reserved for a future work yet to come – but rather their limitations were modestly preset to cheekily and with theatrical overstatement, lift the artist's skirt. All the same, as the helicopters returned to earth, and with the same violent down-thrust, they returned Barry with punishing force as if admonishing a precocious attempt to deny physics. Smashed relics of helicopters and fragments of blades littered the gallery floor. The puppets having taken back control from their puppeteer, the artist is cut from her free from her 'strings'.⁴

David Godbold

¹ Illustrated in the opening pages of the 2010 *mother's* annual.

² Performed at ROSC, in 1980, with her frequent collaborator, Ulay.

³ The 'fabric' of the dress, both structurally and materially, is literally constructed from lightweight parachute material.

⁴ The audience does not witness this, as this aspect is crucially the one thing that Barry never loses control over.



