Harris Barron

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[Author's note: this article was written on the occasion of Harris Barron's retirement from Massachusetts College of Art in 1988. It was originally published in the Mass Art alumni/ae newsletter.]

Harris Barron, painter, sculptor, performance artist, teacher, aviator, writer, and mentor to many, will he leaving the college at the end of the Fall semester to continue his career as artist, thinker, and lover of life. Those of us who know Harris realize that this is not an ending but a beginning, a time for him to refocus on his work and tap the rich resources of his life experience. For the college, however, it is a loss that is only ameliorated by the fact that so much of what he has contributed will continue in his absence.

Harris was born in 1926 and spent his childhood in depression-era Boston. His passion for the arts developed at an early age, as did an intense love for the air and for flight (in time, these passions would become one and the same). He enlisted in the Navy straight out of high school, serving as an aircraft gunner for three years in the Pacific.

In 1947 Harris was discharged from the Navy and entered the Vesper George School of Art in Boston's South End. He studied painting for two years, quickly garnering a reputation as one of the school's best students. Realizing that Vesper George offered little exposure to contemporary art, he enrolled in a summer painting program on Nantucket Island in 1949. When he arrived, he was pleased to discover that nearly everyone in the program was from New York City. Harris had his first opportunity to meet people who were excited about art ideas and who were conversant in the current trends in the art world. By the end of the summer he was planning to move to New York.

Harris describes the three years he lived in New York as "mind expanding" and credits the city with establishing his tastes for music, theater, food, literature. 1949 was an exciting time to be an artist in the city – the first stirrings of the New York school were just being felt. Harris made his living working as a graphic artist for various ad agencies. Evenings were sometimes spent doing life drawing studies with a group of fellow artists who met on a regular basis. Despite the enormous personal growth he experienced during this time, he was not able to make significant connections to further his career as a painter. He returned to Boston when he came to realize that being good wasn't good enough – one had to invest time and energy to "sell" oneself in order to succeed and thrive in the New York art scene. He was troubled by the philosophical directions of the painting establishment and what he perceived as many artists' self-conscious preoccupation with the past. "Most people were interested in the history of where art had come from and how they fit into that … I was really interested in what was inside." Put simply, Harris Barron was searching for a means to address and express the very time in which he was living.

In the fall of 1951, Harris enrolled as a special student at Mass Art. There he met and became engaged to future wife Ros, who turned out to be a kindred spirit in Harris' search for new means of expression. Though Harris and Ros had strong backgrounds in painting, they decided to join the college's fledgling ceramics program, headed by Charles Abbott. Abbott's deep interest in oriental philosophy, particularly Zen Buddhism, was a magnet for them. "We thought that pottery, with that connection [Zen Buddhism], seemed very real and substantial … that it had a connection with the history and development of man." It was also an opportunity for Harris to work in a medium that was more dimensional than paint on canvas.

After graduation in 1954, Harris and Ros established their ceramics studio in a storefront in Brookline Village, hoping to support themselves by producing art pieces for the market. At first they primarily produced wheel-thrown pottery, but soon they began experimenting with the three-dimensional nature of clay. They would cut clay into shapes, fire it, and assemble the pieces on a concrete shell. In the finished piece the shapes formed pictures in a manner similar to mosaics but with the added dimension of depth. This simple but unique process is characteristic of what was becoming Harris' general approach to art, that of creating important new categories by perceptive combinations of media.

Their mosaic technique soon won them commissions to do large-scale mural works for architectural firms involved in the construction of new buildings. These "architectural sculpture" commissions continued through the fifties and into the early sixties and earned the Barrons some notoriety in the art world. In the process they had the opportunity to work with Walter Gropius and his Cambridge-based Architects Collaborative as well as with the renowned architect, Hugh Stubbins. They produced flat wall pieces, friezes, and free-standing works, both indoors and out, for nearly seventy-five commissions. Over the years the work underwent many changes in style and form as Ros began to gravitate towards painting and Harris towards sculpture. Harris' transition to sculpture was a result of his desire to explore fully the idea of three-dimensional objects. He saw sculpture as a more honest and relevant form of expression because, for him, a sculpture "..wasn't an implied image on the surface of arbitrary space … it was the thing itself." He was also excited with the notion that the viewer's point of view was not fixed by the artist but changed dynamically as the object was experienced. During the eight years that Harris worked intensely as a sculptor, he employed extremely varied media, though his major concern was with the relationships of forms in space: presences and absences, differences in scale and depth, the play of light, and the vantage of the viewer.

Though Harris' career as a sculptor was relatively brief he was able to build a reputation which got him one-man shows at galleries in Boston and New York. He participated in many group shows at museums and institutions around the country and won awards, including one for a show at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Boston.

In 1969, Harris, Ros, and a former painting student of Harris', Alan Finneran, embarked on a project that was a precursor to the form now known as performance art. Harris was at the end of a long period of artistic inactivity and had begun to experiment with the use of light, sound and objects in an environmental sense. Ros had been interested in adapting the historical idea of the puppet theater or peep show into a modern context. Alan had just returned to Boston after completing extensive studies in filmmaking. The three decided to collectively create art works in

real time, for an audience, in a theater context. These works would combine light, sound, projected image, and movement. They invented the term *visual theater* to describe this new form, to emphasize that they were visual artists who were expanding their ideas into a new context, not attempting to adapt or redefine traditional theater. The tightly-knit group of artists they formed out of these discussions was named *ZONE.*

ZONE was active from 1969 to 1972 and produced six works, each of which was a major undertaking involving live performers with elaborate costumes, large set pieces, complicated sound and projection systems, custom hardware, and a knowledgeable technical crew. Fundamentally, ZONE was a laboratory for the exploration of art in a real-time context. Harris used the experience to expand upon the ideas about form, scale, and dimension he had first pursued in his sculpture. To these elements were added aspects of time such as duration, simultaneity, and the element of surprise. From this synthesis, Harris was finally able to create works which would provide an all-encompassing experience for the viewer, addressing the senses and the intellect simultaneously.

Once again Harris' importance as an artist was recognized when ZONE was awarded two grants from the New York State Council for the Arts to produce *ZONE: On Tour.* This performance was presented at Automation House in New York and ten SUNY campuses. ZONE was also awarded a Guggenheim grant in 1972 to produce *The Yellow Sound* (based on notes by Wassily Kandinsky) at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. At the end of The Yellow Sound's run, however, ZONE disbanded. Significant support for such experimental groups was sorely lacking, and since ZONE's work did not fall into any of the traditional disciplines, there was no serious critical treatment of it by the press. In late 1969, Harris approached Mass Art's new college president, Jack Nolan, with a proposal to create an undergraduate program patterned after the ZONE group.

Harris had returned to the college in 1963 at Charles Abbott's urgings to teach in the ceramics department part-time. Abbott recognized Harris' unique ability to get people in touch with their sources of creativity. Harris explains his general approach as follows: "Essentially I would come in and try to energize people to believe in themselves, then throw hand grenades and leave." His 1969 proposal was therefore a natural extension of these classes, to create an area in the college where the exploration of ideas would be more important than the acquisition of skill or technique. President Nolan agreed that such a program would benefit the college and provided $1000 worth of budget and a room in the Overland Annex building to get it started. Thus the *Studio for Interrelated Media* (SIM) was born.

During the first few years of SIM, Harris was able to attract a small group of motivated students to transform the room at Overland into a viable space for performances. From 1970 to 1973 the SIM budget was slowly increased. In 1972 the college created the Media and Performing Arts Department and Harris served as its first chair. With the creation of the department came the opportunity for students to major in SIM and the program entered its first stage of real growth. Between 1972 and 1977, Harris took another sabbatical from his own work to make a big push to develop SIM into the lively and important pan of the college that it is today. During that time SIM established the college's first electronic music studio and totally revamped the Longwood Theater by rewiring it for sound, lighting, and communications. SIM also provided students with

systems for video and film production. Harris fought for the creation of movement and sound classes, created a SIM artist-in-residence program, brought numerous performance art, theater, opera, dance, and music groups to the college to interact with students and use them as paid technicians. In 1975 he created *AMOEBA* (All Media Open Exchange By Artists), an exchange program involving Brown, Wesleyan, and Ohio State universities. All of these activities resulted from the energy and efforts of Harris and the students and received little or no official support from the college.

Central to the SIM curriculum were fundamental studies in the use of sound, light, movement, space, time, etc., and their integration into performance works. Another important aspect was *doing.* Harris believed that a student's most substantial work was done outside of class and so he provided a structure that recognized that fact. Equally crucial was the collective structure of SIM which used the group to support and to give and receive feedback to its members. As Harris said recently: "The undergraduate experience should be a welter of confusion, but that confusion should come from bumping into, exposing ideas that you may not have come onto yourself, and seeing other people's response to them. That is the value of the group."

In 1977, SIM students conceived of and held the first *Eventworks,* an international festival of performance and music. Eventworks has occurred every year since and each time is produced entirely by students. Today this festival is recognized as an important and anticipated part of the New England art scene, attracting work from around the world. It is significant, therefore, that 1977 was also the year Harris returned to creating his own performance works. He realized that what he had hoped for had occurred: students had come to view SIM as something of their making as well as his. When Harris returned to performance in 1977, it was with a new awareness created from the experience of learning to fly. Harris had received his license to fly glider craft in 1975 through his association with the M.I.T. glider club. His yearning for the air had stayed with him since he was a boy; for years he had been constructing and flying scale-model, radio controlled aircraft. Harris was ready to merge his experiences in sculpture, architectural work, and visual theater with new perceptions generated from his solo glider flights. The new works became combinations of performance and installation. He coined the term *SCULPTUREVENTS* to describe the new synthesis. The first work in this series was entitled *Einstein's Vanishing Point,* which premiered at the Helen Shlien Gallery in November 1978. As in the ZONE works, the concern with presenting several parallel layers of reality was present, but this time the result was cleaner and more focused as Harris limited the number of physical elements within the piece. Harris' emphasis was to recognize and use the space's characteristics directly in the work, rather than think of the space as a vessel that *contained* the performance. Another concern was the aspect of visual paradox: Harris used flexible "bungee" cords to delineate "lines" in the space which suggested boundaries, planes, infinite spaces, and stored kinetic energy.

Einstein's Vanishing Point and a related work, *Fishing* (1979), were important departures from the earlier work of the ZONE years, but still shared with ZONE the orientation towards large-scale choreographed productions with many performers and technicians. By 1980, Harris had decided to move in a different direction, to focus more on philosophical issues and to increase his contact with the audience. Harris' work had always been intensely personal, involving the desire to *see* the world around him more clearly and reflect it to the audience. He decided to

perform by himself for the first time in his career. He had a strong desire to remove any barriers, symbolic or otherwise, between him and the audience. This also led him to eschew the former technological trappings of his performance work for more accessible and familiar tools.

Out of these resolutions came a series of works under the umbrella title *Air*. The works were characterized by Harris' appearance as the lone performer, usually accompanied by an inexpensive cassette tape recorder and a stack of 3x5" index cards. The cards contained notes for improvised speeches and sometimes sections of text that were recited verbatim. The tape machine provided aural counterpoint to Harris' speeches; at times he would even engage in dialogues with his own voice on tape. The content of the speeches were strings of facts designed to provoke and engage the audience. These facts ranged from political observations to recollections of experiences he had as a solo pilot. Though the stories and observations sometimes seemed esoteric or unconventional, they were held together by Harris' message to the audience, to "take responsibility for their own comprehension." Throughout these works he used the metaphor of flight as a model for everyday life. "When you are flying you are required to take complete charge of your life or you may not survive."

Harris used simple gestures and devices to express his themes. An excellent example of this is in *Air: Discrete Disclosures* (1981), which was performed in Mass Art's Thompson Gallery. At one point early in the performance Harris opened a new can of ground coffee and drew a line with it on the floor of the gallery while describing how long it would take for the smell to reach the nostrils of the audience. For the remainder of the performance the strong fragrance remained an undeniable presence in the space. Here Harris took an everyday object and pulled it out of its normal context to emphasize dramatically how easily we become separate from the reality of our surroundings and, by extension, our lives. Harris has produced a total of seven *Air* works, the most recent being *Landscape with Brain* (1987).

Over the years Harris' work has increasingly involved writing. The primary element in the *Air* performances was the use of the spoken word, whether improvised or prepared. From those works Harris realized that a need was emerging in him to employ a form that would allow his ideas to be explored to a greater depth and breadth. His summers on Cape Cod were now spent writing, though some of the texts were not clearly planned for performances. As was so often the case, he was moving towards some kind of change in his work. In the spring of 1988, Harris got the opportunity to accompany an old pilot friend, Frank Scarabino, on a coast-to-coast trip in a vintage open cockpit biplane. Harris took along a portable tape recorder and made extensive notes every step of the journey. When he returned, he realized that the trip was the catalyst he was waiting for. He is currently working on a book, tentatively titled *Taking the Air: Crossing the Country in an Open Cockpit Biplane.* Although he plans to use the trip as the basic framework for the text, the narrative will support his real purpose: to expand upon and articulate the themes that he has developed over the years as an artist.

It is impossible to imagine what the Massachusetts College of Art might be today were it not for the presence of Harris Barron. In addition to creating the SIM area, he has always been a tireless advocate towards making the college a better place for students. The integrity, energy, perception, intelligence, and love that he infuses in his works has been shared freely with students and associates. The challenges he has posed for himself and his art he also posed to the

college and its administration. As an educator he placed the utmost value in facilitating students in their quest to find themselves. "The major thing is not the tools, hand skills, or even world view … it is in the building of confidence, and finding out what it is you want to do. When you have made that leap, everything else will follow." When Harris was asked recently to recount his most memorable experience in SIM, he replied that there had been many of them, but each involved the "extreme high of seeing individuals come into possession of themselves." Harris' legacy at Mass Art will be the people he touched, encouraged, and supported. Their number is great.