

Barbara Bloom
Never Odd or Even, 1992
Carnegie Museum of Art

Barbara Bloom has been called both a hostess and a detective because her complex installations are perfectly and beautifully orchestrated stage sets where viewers may discover multiple layers of meaning. These labels are too restrictive, however, for they imply an event – a dinner party, for example, or a mystery story – that has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Instead, Bloom plays the art or cultural historian who culls information from various sources to enrich the associations her ensembles evoke; she is adept at what Karen Finley, in a recent performance, called the art historian's task: the art of juxtaposition. In this respect, Bloom's open-ended exploration of a theme in images and words shares a kinship with the London library of art historian Aby Warburg in which the books were arranged loosely by subject instead of a standard classification system; one book led to another, continually widening the sphere of knowledge.

Bloom arranges objects in ways that require the viewers to *really* look. In *Lost and Found* (1987), for example, she presented two sets of nearly identical items – furniture, paintings, objects, and photographs – to force the viewer to differentiate between them, a compare and contrast method commonly used by art historians to teach visual perception. Bloom's work incorporates another aspect of art history; iconology – the study of symbols and how their meaning changes over time and across cultures. In *Seven Deadly Sins* (1987-88), Bloom used chairs and photographs – instead of the usual visual personifications – to suggest the various sins. "Lust" for example, was represented by a comfortable leather club chair. On the arm was a blue velvet jewelry box containing a wedding ring with the word "lust" engraved on the inside. The accompanying photograph showed a museum installation consisting of a chaise, a vase, and five paintings of female nudes. "Lust" acquired two intertwined meanings. In her *your-de-force* installation *The Reign of Narcissism* (1989), Bloom explored the meaning of self-love by featuring her own image on everything from her dental X-rays, silk-screened onto the upholstery of a Louis XV chair, to chocolates stamped with her profile to the embossing of her name on the spines of *The Collected Works of Barbara Bloom*.

Now, in *Never Odd or Even*, Bloom adds the role of the museum curator to her repertoire. She arranges butterfly specimens from the Carnegie museum of natural history with plaster casts, photographs, and texts to amplify the principals she is investigating: symmetry and order. Bloom's installations have always presented ideas and suggested nuances in the same way that museum exhibitions do – through the juxtaposition of fragments. A museum of art, after all, cannot tell the entire story of art – much less relate it to cultural, social, political and economic histories – just by installing works of art. And a natural history museum cannot impart a complete understanding of insects or people through a display of specimens or artifacts. The gaps are many, the stories are many; museums suggest entire histories with fragmentary evidence. Bloom does exactly the same thing in her installations; through the presentation of objects and in an accompanying artist's book, she gives the viewer bits and pieces of information, allowing them to form their own conclusions. She thereby reveals the arbitrariness and relativity of meaning, reality, truth, forcing the viewer to participate in the production of meaning.

The layers of meaning in Bloom's work are so complex that it is impossible to explore them all, and she purposely leaves loose threads to intrigue the viewer. Rather than neatly packaging meaning, Bloom relies on synchronicity and the suggested relationships between objects and ideas to stimulate thought. Bloom comes at a theme again and again, often in oblique ways. As in the creation of a symphony, she weaves the different instruments into a complex composition. She said about her book *Ghostwriter* (1988) that she wanted "to build a very complex patchwork of voices and of narratives and of images that would link and overlap in many different ways. Then you as a reader pick out of those things the connections you can or want to make.

In this installation, she has presented butterflies, those beautiful, fragile, and elusive insects, which, having been caught and prepared for scientific study, are organized into various types for further analysis. She employs the systems of categorization and classification that became codified in the 19th century, systems which today are criticized for being too narrow and confining. Instead of isolating these specimens as a museum or scientist would, Bloom juxtaposes them with other objects in a manner reminiscent of 19th-century curiosity cabinets, or Warburg's arrangement of books, to explore the concepts of doubling – a theme that has persisted in her work for the last ten years – and symmetry. The butterflies are the centerpiece, but Bloom surrounds them with other examples of doubling: plaster casts of Janus heads and battering goats, appropriated photographs of twins, and tiny photographs that are folded like butterflies, labeled like specimens, and presented in case-like frames. The latter are primarily of architecture and gardens that have been miniaturized – taken out of context and out of scale, as are most objects in museums. By including natural and contrived forms of symmetry and displaying them in the neoclassical Hall of Sculpture, itself a symmetrical room, Bloom reveals the symmetry's positive and negative consequence, the latter poignantly manifested by Nazi architecture or, less obviously, by the neoclassical buildings in Pittsburgh where order is equated with power. Bloom's eclectic ensemble demonstrates that disparate objects are likely to be two sides of the same coin rather than being in total opposition, just as natural history and art objects are not altogether different. Organizing principals can be arbitrary and limiting. Barbara Bloom emphasizes the fluidity of connections and associations rather than the rigidity of categories and classification. As she says, "its not the pieces themselves, its the relationship between them." The meaning of her writings or her installations is not fixed but open-ended; in fact, *Never Odd or Even* has been installed previously in an exhibition held in East and West Berlin and in another show in Munich. At each location, the piece and even its title changes. Here at the Carnegie Museum of Art, Bloom has used two rooms, reconfiguring the elements, and added photographs of the museums classical casts to further underscore her views on doubling and differentiation.

Her book, *Never Odd or Even*, which accompanies this exhibition, not only amplifies the ideas of order and symmetry but also complicates them, suggesting their use in other disciplines. It is dedicated to Vladimir Nabokov with whom Bloom shares a fascination with ephemerality and symmetry. Bloom's book opens with two photographs of Nabokov studying butterflies, a serious passion for him, indeed certain butterflies have even been named after him. Starting with butterflies, Bloom builds and expands to consider the broader implications of collecting, propagandistic architecture, twins, etc. The book contains twenty folios printed with textual excerpts, some in English and some in German (thereby thwarting the reader's desire to completely understand everything). Bloom inserts photographs of doubles (twins, matching vases) and symmetrical objects (shells, buildings, garden plans) to illustrate yet another story. She incorporates charts, including one that orders the Latin names for butterflies; a page from a mythological dictionary (an analogy to a museum as storehouse of knowledge?) that explains the history of Romulus, with his "double" Remus, founded Rome; essays on symmetry in architecture and nature; "scientific" studies on twins – their physical, mental, and emotional relationships; and a page from the recent bestseller *Chaos* that describing the "butterfly effect." The latter re-enforces Bloom's critical approach: "The (computer) programmers hoped the results were not too grossly distorted by the many unavoidable simplifying assumptions."

Another essay from Hermann Weyl's 1952 essay "Symmetry," may summarize this exhibition: "Symmetry, as wide or narrow as you may define its meaning, is one idea by which man through the ages has tried to comprehend and create order, beauty, and perfection." In many ways the search for beauty and perfection (a tombstone in *The Reign of Narcissism* read, "She traveled the world to find beauty.") underlines much of Bloom's work. But she does not let the positive connotations go uncriticized: elsewhere in the book, she reproduces Albert Speer's architectural chart and photographs of paired guards in front of Nazi architecture, hinting at the abusive use of the controlling element inherent in symmetry. Both sides are presented, though readers are allowed to make associations on their own.

The Weyl fragment also frustrates the reader for it ends in mid-sentence as the author is posing a question. This is also the case in the excerpt from John Fowles's *The Collector*, which seems to be the story of a kidnapping. It illuminates another side of "collecting" butterflies: the connection between the capturing and preserving of specimens and death. As we enter the story, the dominant male is showing his guest/victim around his place, judging her by her reactions. When shown his collection of butterflies – her "fellow victims" – she responds negatively; "I'm thinking of all the living beauty you've ended. I hate scientists...I hate people who collect things, and classify things and give them names and forget all about them." The sentiment is echoed in the excerpt from Conrad's *Lord Jim* in which Stein discusses his butterfly collection and the knowledge it provides while hinting at the problems inherent in social classification and categorization.

Presented in fragmentary form, these and other excerpts amplify Bloom's installation. Their juxtaposition provokes speculation and a desire for more information. Bloom is the hostess who gently encourages her guests to "perform," the detective who goads his suspects, and the composer whose multi-layered compositions evoke myriad associations. She never provides an ending, neither in her installations nor her books. The title of her 1988 installation is a clue to understanding her work. Literally translated, *Esprit de l'Escalier* means "spirit of the stairs"; it refers to the "witty remark which is thought of too late" or a "good retort conceived after the event." Bloom is interested in stimulating, not codifying, ideas. Unlike most postmodernists, she does not just deconstruct meaning; rather, her concern is the production and manufacture of meaning. Her installations suggest the relativity of meaning and how ever-widening associations and ideas can lead to new levels of understanding. While others are intent on deconstructing meaning, Bloom works to reconstruct it.

Vicky A. Clark, 1992
Carnegie Museum of Art