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Barbara Stevani: *I Find Myself* is supported by The Ampersand Foundation, the Estate of Barbara Stevani, Flat Time House, the Henry Moore Foundation, Knotenpunkt and Lisson Gallery.

Front cover image: Barbara Stevani performing as part of a happening by John Latham, Galerie Aachen, Germany. December 9, 1966. Photo by Henning Wolters. Courtesy Estate of Barbara Stevani.

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“My own path in this history has hitherto registered as virtually invisible. Hidden behind both the artists involved and the organisations themselves.”
- Barbara Steveni, July 2008

The life and work of Barbara Steveni (1928–2020), who described herself as an artist–activist, embodied an archive and pioneered a diffused art practice that resists clear definition. Invisible threads interlink the various roles she played in the contexts within which she was situated and responding to. As with other women artists of her generation she combined childrearing and managing domestic chores with the production of work, and was frequently overshadowed by her male partner’s success. The importance of Steveni’s role in the Artist Placement Group (APG) was often marginalised by gender-inflected terms such as ‘honorary secretary’, her practice rarely recognised as having a value in its own right. Both the exhibition *I Find Myself* and the accompanying publication intend to redress this imbalance and encompass her life’s work, drawing together her practice and her experimentation with materials, media and strategies across a career spanning more than seventy years.

Steveni’s complex practice can be simultaneously deeply personal and intimate, while grand enough in conceptual scale to endeavour to change policy at government level. Hers is a dematerialised and research-based practice, married to the collection of objects and matter. Her work is unconstrained by a studio and clearly embodied in the material of her own home. Her diaries, extensive note taking and archiving reveal an artist conscious of the value of her own legacy, and yet she only latterly accepted she had an ‘art practice’ at all. Her collaborative approach was at once discrete and all-encompassing, often defining the terms of a piece after its production, drawing in bystanders and audiences as performative partners by effect. It is a practice probably best exemplified by how in later years she would welcome new relationships: through conversation over borscht at her house on Anstey Road, Peckham. The sweeping multidisciplinary discussions that took place there encompassed anything from the personal to the geopolitical, while sharing a soup that was very much a part of her past and her familial history.

Steveni conceived the idea for APG in 1965, becoming its spokesperson and primary strategist. The group organised placements for artists in

industry and later public institutions with the aim of improving society through the creative potential of the artist. Her work with APG inspired many and had prominent supporters in varied fields, from art critic Lucy Lippard to politicians Barbara Castle and Tony Benn, among many others. David Harding, founder of the Environmental Art course at Glasgow School of Art, cited his conversations with Steveni and the ideology of APG to be of enormous significance to him: “[the] axiom that ‘the context is half the work’ became the major influence of my teaching ... it became the basic focus of the new department I headed.” The proposal that an art form can exist in the world, outside of art contexts, with the artist’s role and practice framed around discursivity is an important precursor of socially engaged art practice today. In later years she led APG’s re-establishment as O+I (Organisation and Imagination), which for 20 years organised activities with an educational emphasis. Many later artists and educators embedded her investigation of the social impact of art in their work and teaching, meaning that her thinking has had a decisive, yet largely unrecognised, influence on UK arts education.

Although the extent of Steveni’s influential work remains difficult to quantify, her ongoing impact is explicit in the many creative practitioners that cite Steveni as a key inspiration, including ‘Policy Lab’, a recently created UK Civil Service department which places sociologists and artists governmental departments. Despite the clear influence of her long career, *I Find Myself* is the first exhibition to address the totality of Steveni’s practice. Since a resurgence of critical interest reassessing the significance of APG began in the 2000s, Steveni has become well known as the organisation’s initiator and driving force. The time is now right to contextualise the place and role of APG activity within her collaborative artistic approach and understand how it is positioned within a much larger body of work.

What makes this exhibition particularly relevant today is the generosity of Steveni’s practice. She privileged discussion, and in particular conversation, as a platform to produce work. Working with and across generations and multiple communities wherever she was practicing, she drew attention to our underlying political and societal responsibilities. In this exhibition we have included several jointly authored and cooperative works including Steveni’s film *I Find Myself*, made with poet and sound artist Z’EV; Incidental Unit, which reignited APG’s lineage in 2016; and

traces of her performative participation in happenings by Yoko Ono and long-term partner and collaborator John Latham. Steveni frequently used the term ‘DNA’ to illustrate how attitudes to art practice can be shared and developed via a determining strategic shape that is passed between artists and practitioners of different generations. Continuing this collaborative approach we have invited artists Anne Bean and Laure Prouvost, who held a close working relationship with Steveni, and Eloise Hawser, who holds a close affinity to her thinking, to complete, remake and reimagine artworks for the exhibition.

In putting this exhibition together, it has been necessary to sift (to use one of her preferred expressions) through Steveni’s archives, collected objects, personal belongings and digital files to uncover completed works, lost works, unfinished works that she intended to finish, and unfinished works she had no intention to finish. We had the distinct privilege of access to Steveni’s personal archive that was being catalogued by archivists Victoria Lane and Judy Vaknin in advance of being transferred to the Tate Archive, which proved critical to our undertaking. This foundation allowed us to carefully consider how to best present artworks which had never before been exhibited, alongside those to be re-created. With documentation at times lacking, the process often depended on the memories of individuals present at the time, and the scrutiny of loan lists, archival material and digital ephemera to determine the artistic intention and physical make up of a piece. Steveni’s self-documented studio tours, wherein she describes her own thinking and working processes, gave us invaluable insight in her own words into some of her collections and assemblages.

We intended our process to mirror Steveni’s methodology in being cooperative and discursive. She used the term ‘engines’ for people working closely with her ideas or in close affinity when considering the continuation of these ideas into the future, and so we have deliberately drawn on this sympathetic network of artists and writers for the exhibition commissions and essays in its accompanying publication. With a practice so explicitly biographical, by necessity it has been a personal process. With this in mind, it is also important that the exhibition imparted a degree of historical and personal background to Steveni’s practice — as she would say ‘context is half the work’.