

Barbara T. Smith: “Old Shoes: Performance Relics 1968-1975” at The Box

By [Christopher Miles](#) Wednesday, Dec 16 2009

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Thank goodness for smaller venues that pull off what larger ones should have. [Barbara T. Smith](#), who has spent this fall enacting a series of knitting performances at locations around [Pasadena](#) as part of the [Armory Center's](#) “Installations Inside/Out” exhibition, has received a list of accolades that would be enviable to many an artist, and was rightly included in survey exhibitions including “Out of Actions: Between the Performance and Object, 1949-1979,” and “WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution,” both organized by MOCA, and “Los Angeles 1955-1985: The Birth of an Art Capitol,” organized by the Pompidou. Her inclusion in serious surveys addressing the histories of performance, feminist art and Los Angeles is a no-brainer, but it also seems like a bit of typecasting. While contemporaries like [Paul McCarthy](#) and [Chris Burden](#) (Smith's classmate) have become stars of the international exhibition circuit, the equally deserving Smith has been relegated more to the category of a player within survey ensembles of which the likes of McCarthy and Burden are the headliners. But if the serious, fully fleshed-out consideration Smith's oeuvre warrants can't happen on Grand Avenue or [Wilshire](#), at least it can happen at [Pomona College](#), which was home to a terrific Smith retrospective curated by [Rebecca McGrew](#) and [Jennie Klein](#) in 2005, and on Chung King Road at The Box, where Smith showed in 2007, and has a retrospective exhibition up now. Though evocative, the title also does the show something of a disservice. More than a collection of leftovers and souvenirs, “Old Shoes,” via some rather interesting relics and a slew of documentary material, offers an engaging accounting of this important period of Smith's career. Better-known works, such as the 1973 performance *Feed Me*, in which a nude Smith made camp and held court in a museum restroom where visitors could share her companionship, are documented here. But also chronicled are lesser-known works such as *Fire Rings*, *Mass Meal* and *Plots*, a 1969 trilogy of events that took place, in lieu of an available exhibition venue, on the beach, in the artist's studio, and in a vacant lot, and the playful and smart 1974 performance *Scan I*, in which 45 people dressed in white posed as bits of TV “snow” while sitting on bleachers and watching a monitor that variously directed them to blow bubblegum, smoke and stick out color-painted tongues. Far from a dry display of artifacts, this exhibition is both inspiring and elegiac, stirring something inside you that both laments the loss of a more experimental and free sentiment in the arts, and wonders if maybe it's not all that lost. In mounting this exhibition, The Box serves both an underexposed artist and an underexposed audience.

The Box, 977 Chung King Road, L.A.; Wed.-Sat., 12-6 p.m.; through January 23. (213) 625-1747, [theboxla.com](#). For information on Smith's remaining knitting performances, visit [armoryarts.org](#).



Courtesy of the artist and The Box, L.A.
Barbara T. Smith, Image from performance: *Scan I*, 1974.