

WIDEWALLS

Emphasizing and Strengthening the Female Voice in Video Art - In Conversation with Dara Birnbaum

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The groundbreaking artist **Dara Birnbaum** has profoundly influenced American and global video art histories. Her oeuvre, spanning nearly four decades, charts the trajectory of personal development but also the development of the medium.

From early works focused on **experiments with technology** and testing of its limits to engagement with the ways we understand and consume images to social struggles, power relations, and gender issues, Birnbaum's rich artistic output touches upon the most important aspects of Western culture and its technological development.

However, like many female artists, her work is not widely known or recognized as that of her male contemporaries. Providing an in-depth examination and introducing her practice to new audiences has been the aim of the current retrospective at the Hessel Museum of Art, **on view until November 27th, 2022**. The exhibition starts with her early video exercises and moves on to her iconic works, such as the seminal *Technology / Transformation: Wonder Woman (1978/79)*.

Birnbaum applied different techniques in her work, including re-editing and inserting of images, which "*prefigure the operations of popular media culture today*," said **Lauren Cornell**, Director of the Graduate Program and Chief Curator at the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College. "*Yet what is truly Birnbaum's legacy, beyond these direct formal antecedents, is her systems analysis and her insistence on engaging media on her own terms.*"

We had a talk with Birnbaum to learn more about the exhibition and her practice, early video art, themes that inspire her, and her future plans. In this **exclusive interview**, she tells us about her major works, her beginnings and education, the New York scene, technology, and the importance of the female perspective in her work.



Dara Birnbaum, *Will-O'-The-Wisp*, 1985, three-channel color video, quadraphonic sound, black and white photographic enlargement, on view in *Dara Birnbaum: Reaction* at CCS Bard's Hessel Museum of Art. Courtesy of CCS Bard. ©Dara Birnbaum. Photo by Olympia Shannon.

The Retrospective

Widewalls: Your first retrospective in the United States opened this June. What can you tell us about the exhibition? What works are on display?

Dara Birnbaum: *Reaction* is meant to provide a penetrating new perspective on my work of the last forty-five years. It starts with my very earliest work utilizing a single camera from circa 1975. The

selection on view purposefully includes single-channel works but also a number of complex installations, such as *Damnation of Faust* (1984) and *Will O' the Wisp* (1985), two large-scale media installations that even required the museum to reconfigure the space by tearing out partition walls. A number of works like *Transmission Tower: Sentinel* (1992) and *Hostage* (1994) are more politically oriented, by citing specific, highly relevant events such as the onset of the Gulf War and the kidnapping and murder of Hanns Martin Schleyer by the terrorist group RAF. Throughout this exhibit, a number of vitrines are woven within the gallery spaces in order to provide more intimate access into my creative process. The show was curated by Lauren Cornell.

Widewalls: The exhibition starts with Attack Piece from 1975 and other early video exercises. Can you tell us more about your early pieces and how challenging it was to make video art in the 1970s?

DB: *Attack Piece* is a two-channel work that consists of the artist confronted by colleagues in a gameplay situation. The artist is in a central position with a still camera as the participants challenge her with a Super 8 camera. It is meant to explore a series of overlapping power dynamics: the artist and the participants, the single woman and the group, and the two opposing commonplace technological tools (still and moving-image photography).

After living for a while in Florence, Italy, I moved to New York City and was loaned a Portapak by the artist Alan Sondheim. The first works were done in a small studio entirely by myself. These exercises, *Six Movements* (1975), were mainly performative artworks in black and white, in which I directly confronted the camera and viewer in experiments that played with the nature of the medium itself. This work was influenced by artists like Vito Acconci and Bruce Nauman but now emphasized female subjectivity, a breakthrough at the time.

The reason I left Florence was that I did not think that a woman could have access to make videos there. When I arrived in New York City, I became part of a young group of artists interested in alternative spaces rather than commercial galleries. That peer group gave me a chance to both be inspired by and be engaged with art. I felt like there were two mentors, Dan Graham and Willoughby Sharp, plus younger artists like Scott Billingsley and Robin Winters. Video at that time was barely present or accepted in galleries. It was not yet recognized as a viable art form. In America, it seemed to allow women to be actively creative in the field, yet it was still very male-dominated.



Dara Birnbaum, *Kiss the Girls: Make them Cry*, 1979, two-channel color video, two-channel stereo audio; 6:26 min. Installation view of *First Light: A Decade of Collecting* at the ICA, The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA, 2016-17. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery. ©Dara Birnbaum. Photo by Charles Mayer.

The Beginnings

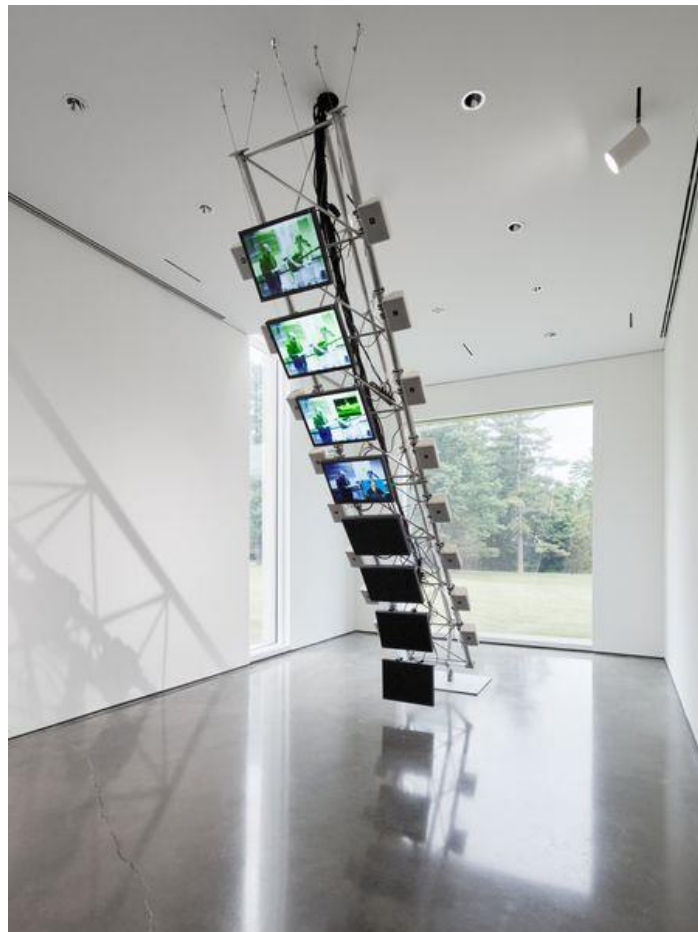
Widewalls: You work mainly in video art but have also experimented with conceptual, performance, and appropriation art. What drew you to these styles and media?

DB: I think that conceptual, performance, and appropriation art are all embedded within my video artwork. I didn't find any separation. I grew up on conceptual and Pop art. I was drawn to the real-time aspect of video—its ability to be portable and used independently (without a crew). With analog video, I could also be my own editor. I enjoyed its newness and that I was dealing with a medium that

was almost like chess: it took place largely in your mind until you sat down and completed the electronic edit.

Widewalls: How would you describe your beginnings? When did you start making art, and who were your influences early on?

DB: I started making art at a very young age, but I didn't want anyone to touch it. So I kept my activities very private, although I did win awards in drawing and painting as a child. I was sparked by the contemporary turn in painting and sculpture through the New York School, such as Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Jim Dine. Pop art had a great influence on me, such as Andy Warhol and Claus Oldenburg. The sad thing for me was my early influences were men, mainly. In 1971, I left architecture to attend the San Francisco Art Institute and, upon graduating, went to the Academia di Belle Arti in Florence. However, the most important influence was accidentally coming upon the gallery Centro Diffusione Grafica, owned by Maria Gloria Biccocchi. There, visiting artists were encouraged to do videos, such as Joan Jonas, Vito Acconci, and Charlemagne Palestine.



Dara Birnbaum, *Transmission Tower: Sentinel*, 1992, eight-channel color video, two sections of Rohm transmission tower, eight stereo channels of audio, with custom hardware, 2:48 min, on view in *Dara Birnbaum: Reaction* at CCS Bard's Hessel Museum of Art. Courtesy of CCS Bard. ©Dara Birnbaum. Photo by Olympia Shannon.

Reflections on Technology

Widewalls: Technology significantly changed over the decades. How would you compare video art then and now?

DB: Early video art certainly reflected the technology of its time. In 1965, Nam June Paik picked up the first American Portapak as a tool for art making. Throughout the past decades of video and moving image, technology has changed so dynamically that it is hard to keep up and hard to control the technology rather than be dominated by it. There was a rawness to early video art, whereas now many artists seem concerned with utilizing the advances of the technology through high-resolution, VR, AR, all reliant on digital components. Historically, video is the most reflective form of the sweeping changes in tools that are reflected in an artist's work.

Widewalls: You tested many techniques, including using found and remixed footage. How did your practice evolve over the years?

DB: Most of my works, from the earliest to the present, involve the act of appropriation. I felt the need to break through the dominant communication systems in our culture by altering the syntax and recontextualizing images that are readily available in popular culture. The Damnation of Faust trilogy was my hiatus from utilizing found footage, maybe much more aligned to a cinema verité approach. Then there were projects that combined imagery, such as *Rio VideoWall* (1987-89), which juxtaposed shot landscape footage with CNN news. *Erwartung* (2001) also used original still imagery. Later works such as *Arabesque* (2011) culled imagery from YouTube and Hollywood films.



Dara Birnbaum, *PM Magazine*, 1982, five-channel video, color, three-stereo channels of audio, 4:20 min, black and white photographic enlargement, on view in *Dara Birnbaum: Reaction* at CCS Bard's Hessel Museum of Art. Courtesy of CCS Bard. ©Dara Birnbaum. Photo by Olympia Shannon.

Emphasizing Female Voice

Widewalls: What are the topics and techniques you are returning to constantly? Can you tell us more about your interest in gender and activism?

DB: Recontextualizing imagery, usually from popular sources, in order to disrupt its flow within the culture. Formal uses of repetition. Morphing. The importance of equally developing sound scores to visual content. Awareness of ranges of colors that have a visceral and emotional effect.

Originally, I chose to emphasize the female voice and strengthen it, based on my own life experiences. When I graduated with a degree in architecture from Carnegie Mellon University in 1969, I was the only woman in my class and the youngest person ever to graduate. I call my years living in Berkeley my "growing up years," circa 1970 to 1974. Berkeley was an important center and dominating force in the '60s and '70s activism. For me, that laid a foundation in Marxism, and presently I only see all the more need for an activist position within art and society.

Widewalls: *One of your defining pieces is Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman from 1978/79. Can you tell us a bit about how you created this piece and your intention?*

DB: At that time, I saw television as a one-way communication system, coming directly at the viewer without the viewer's ability to "talk back." I wanted to disrupt the flow of imagery in programs such as the top-rated show *Wonder Woman*. I didn't believe in the ideology being set forth in such programming. I had to pirate the material from friends in the industry, as there were no home-recording devices. I edited it by myself at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design at night after teaching. When editing the footage from the program, I was listening to the radio, and the song *Wonder Woman in Discoland* came through by chance. This became the second part of the work.



Left: Dara Birnbaum, *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*, 1978-79, single-channel, color video, 5:50 min, stereo sound. Courtesy of the artist, Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York, and Marian Goodman Gallery. ©Dara Birnbaum. / **Right:** Dara Birnbaum, *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*, 1978-79, single-channel, color video, 5:50 min., stereo sound, on view in *Dara Birnbaum: Reaction* at CCS Bard's Hessel Museum of Art. Courtesy of CCS Bard. ©Dara Birnbaum. Photo by Olympia Shannon.

Social Media and Future Plans

Widewalls: *Your works follow mass media changes, and in recent pieces, you also use materials from Youtube. What is your opinion on social media, and how do you engage with this aspect of popular culture?*

DB: Beyond YouTube, I've basically only engaged with Facebook and similar sites. I am not engaged with TikTok. I believe that upcoming generations are highly affected by social media in ways I hope that the upcoming artists will challenge.

Widewalls: *What is next for you after this retrospective? Where could we see your work next?*

DB: On August 20th, I will be opening a survey show with the Miller ICA in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, curated by Elizabeth Chodos. A newly commissioned work, working-titled *Journey*, will premiere there in late fall. I am also part of an upcoming show at MODAL gallery at SODA, Manchester in October of this year, and I am in the preliminary stages of being part of a large group video show at a major institution next year. Two new books have been released on my work: *Note(s): Work(ing) Process(es) Re: Concerns (That Take On/Deal With)*, published by Primary Information, and *Dara Birnbaum: Reaction*, published by Dancing Foxes in conjunction with the CCS Bard and the Miller ICA exhibitions.

Featured image: Dara Birnbaum, *Damnation of Faust*, 1983, two-channel color video, quadraphonic sound, black and white photographic enlargement, painted colored walls, on view in *Dara Birnbaum: Reaction* at CCS Bard's Hessel Museum of Art. Courtesy of CCS Bard. ©Dara Birnbaum. Photo by Olympia Shannon.