

# FRIEZE

## Slippage and Misdirection: Dara Birnbaum in Conversation With Martine Syms

The artists discuss the systems and ideologies underpinning media and  
 the ways images are distributed today

Dara Birnbaum, Lauren Cornell, Martine Syms



This year, after several years of development, I presented shows of Martine Syms’s and Dara Birnbaum’s art at the Hessel Museum of Art at Bard College – the latter was the first retrospective of Birnbaum’s work in the US. Placing these artists side by side tells a story about video art and its development: as a response to the monolithic nature of broadcast TV and the more dispersed nature of digital media. The below is excerpted from a wide-ranging conversation in which the two artists discussed the beginnings of their careers in video, shaped by different eras, and how they have each endeavoured to expand the form of art and its contexts. I prompted the conversation by asking about their shared interest in identifying and deconstructing popular archetypes of women in their work.

–Lauren Cornell



Dara Birnbaum, (A) *Drift of Politics: Two Women are Active in a Space*, 1978, video stills. Courtesy: the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery

**Dara Birnbaum** I've always found it somewhat problematic that my work has been categorized as dealing with archetypes of women, but there is a truth to it. Early on, for example, *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* [1978–79] was a reaction to the fact that, at the time, *Wonder Woman* [1975–79], which featured a stereotypical presentation of womanhood, was the number one television show. I felt I needed to speak from my own position and to challenge this portrayal of what was supposedly the role of women in American culture.

**Martine Syms** An ongoing interest of mine is in language broadly and as a larger system. I am interested in the way groups like the Language poets in the US or Oulipo in France used constraints to reveal the ideologies that inform how we talk, and how that's baked into the thinking of the systems in which we participate. Ultimately, all cultural output is a text. The idea of reading against, disidentifying, was something I did instinctively to survive in the world, and to understand why I was curious about something and what that was telling me.

A poetic approach to filmmaking has been key for me because it's generative. In *Borrowed Lady* [2016], for instance, I was thinking about representations of Black women in Hollywood at a time when there was a lot of attention in commercial fashion on the beauty of Black women. This was being spoken about as if it were some great miracle. I wanted to re-enact that recognition – or, rather, misrecognition – within that value system using mimesis. *Borrowed Lady* replicates moments from popular culture – what was circulating online and in print media – while the performer, artist Diamond Stingily, improvises and copies my mannerisms, her own, or those of various women from her family or mine. She would repeat a word or phrase until it 'broke' or the language became obscured, forming a rigorous time-based structure. For me, working with constrained systems in terms of both editing and format is a way of manipulating the larger structure.

While I understand the political necessity of naming and identifying in order to achieve certain rights within the systems in which we exist, I always find it challenging because that's not how anything actually feels to me. That's part of my interest in indexical categorization: I don't necessarily feel like a 'woman' or a 'Black woman' all the time.



Martine Syms, *Borrowed Lady*, 2016, installation view, 'Martine Syms: Griot College' at CCS Bard's Hessel Museum of Art. Courtesy: the artist and CCS Bard; photograph: Olympia Shannon

**DB** In *Lesson Plans: To Keep the Revolution Alive* [1975], I looked to what were then primetime television programmes and divided the language from the image so that the viewer could read what the people were saying. For instance, in *Police Story* [1973–77], two cops – one Black, one white – look out of their car at a Black suspect. The first asks: 'Do you think that's our guy?' The other replies: 'Yes, might be. It might be our turkey. I want him so badly. I think I could eat him.' When you are presented with the opportunity to actually read the decontextualised text, which was originally spoken at great speed on the show, you see how unbelievable and disarming it is. At that time in television, the dialogue was one of the more perverse features of this new medium, with the speed of delivery preventing viewers from reflecting on or, at times, even comprehending the content. Every night of the week at primetime, these dramas were imposing an adversarial language onto the show's main characters by using film techniques like reverse-angle shots. Television was a one-way medium, its audience tending to become passive: I wanted to show the aggressive conditioning forced upon viewers by these programmes.

When I started to utilize video as a medium, most of my first works were quite different from the later works. It was more performative. Maybe I was trying to situate my practice as substantially different from existing works in a particularly male-dominated field. I became interested in television because I saw it as the dominant cultural language of the time, even

though getting one's hands on imagery was difficult. There was no home video recording equipment at that point; in fact, there still wasn't cable television in downtown New York. At the beginning of the 1980s, it was illegal to record any imagery from television, punishable by stringent mandates. However, I do have strict rules in terms of appropriation: I don't believe in appropriating from the work of other artists or creatives. For me, television was a commercialized industry, so I was taking from a corporation to try to analyse what was going on.

**MS** There is also intense digital-rights management, but I have pirated many things. When I was in college, I often digitized material because, as formats evolve – whether from VHS to DVD or from DVD to streaming – there're a lot that doesn't make the jump. I like archiving material to re-use it, so I convert it into whatever format it isn't extant on. When people ask me about my ethics around that, I'm like: make a lot, take a lot. I'm still on a bunch of file-sharing torrent sites. Somebody asked me recently how I would feel if my own work showed up on one of these sites. I said I would feel like I made it, that there's someone out there who wants to experience the same feeling I had when I was like: 'I must watch this thing.'



Martine Syms, *Misdirected Kiss*, 2016, installation view, 'Martine Syms: Grio College' at CCS Bard's Hessel Museum of Art. Courtesy: the artist and CCS Bard; photograph: Olympia Shannon

**DB** I like this idea of slippage that happens when you talk about systems. We're in an era where the image is no longer grounded in a certain way. Either with or without our

permission, it slips and slides a certain amount into other means or methods, so that a work you might have considered more intimate might end up on a billboard. Currently, artists and creative voices find themselves faced with this overload of images in society. It's a profound shift that begs the question: can independent voices still exist with purpose today?

**MS** I can certainly relate to this idea of compression and the intimate image. On the flipside of you discussing how images appear on billboards, there are also all of these images of death being circulated. Growing up, and over the last ten years especially, this compression of images has been a profound part of my life, but these images have also had a real impact on my physical body, which is something that also slips. There are these images and videos that are foundational in my lifetime – the Zapruder film or Rodney King footage, for example – whose contexts shift: now, this groundlessness is the context I'm in; it's the context we're all in.

I'm interested in trying to make art that provides the ground for these images. Make the ground in the piece itself so that it can slip in these different streams. It's fascinating. There's the entire spectrum of slippages. I think that's such a key concept.

*This article first appeared in frieze issue 230 with the headline 'Make a Lot, Take a Lot'.*

*Main image: Dara Birnbaum, Lesson Plans (To Keep the Revolution Alive), 1977, detail, each panel 25 × 35.5 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery; photograph: Thierry Bal*