

**FONDAZIONE PRADA PRESENTS A SURVEY EXHIBITION DEDICATED TO DARA BIRNBAUM FROM 13 APRIL TO 25 SEPTEMBER 2023 AT THE OSSERVATORIO IN MILAN**

Milan, 27 March 2023 – Fondazione Prada presents an extensive survey exhibition dedicated to the work of Dara Birnbaum from 13 April to 25 September 2023 (Press Preview on 12 April) at the Osservatorio, its space located at Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II in Milan. A parallel exhibition will be on view at Prada Aoyama Tokyo from 1 June to 28 August 2023.

Osservatorio is Fondazione Prada's centre devoted to visual experimentation and research focused on potential intersections and collisions between technologies and cultural expressions. It is a free-thinking platform open to reflection on various artistic and media languages and their impact in an ever-changing political and social landscape.

Curated by Barbara London, with Valentino Catricalà and Eva Fabbris, the exhibition offers different perspectives to understand the distinguished career of Dara Birnbaum (New York, 1946), an artist who consistently has challenged the precepts of art and mass media. "Dara Birnbaum" comprises a selection of single-channel videos, sound works, multi-channel installations, photographs, and 3-D specialized prints on Plexiglas as realized by the artist from 1975 to 2022. This exhibition reveals her deep exploration of the cultural intersections of video art, television, and consumer technologies and—among other themes—the gendered biases reflected in the representation of women in popular culture.

In Milan, the public will first encounter one of Birnbaum's best-known and earliest art works *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* (1978-79). Displayed at the entrance on the ground floor of the Osservatorio, it will be visible to all visitors to the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II, evoking the way it was once exhibited in the window of H-Hair Salon de Coiffure, Inc. on Prince Street in Soho, New York. In her video work Birnbaum re-edited footage from the popular television program *Wonder Woman* to emphasize how mass media alternates between heroic and trivializing representations of women. Her work becomes a deconstruction of this fictional character, as created in an industry predominantly dominated by men.

The exhibition path conceived by the artist for the two floors of the Osservatorio doesn't follow a chronological order. However, by employing a carefully selected series of works, it illustrates the wide range of media and artistic languages employed by Birnbaum in her practice and explores the recurrent topics of her ongoing creative work.

In *Quiet Disaster* (1999), Birnbaum created three enlarged anime images portraying the reactions of characters in danger and utilizing Duratrans prints (transparent backlit films) mounted onto circular Plexiglas discs to emphasize a look of "fear" when one is confronted by danger.

Derived from an unrealized project from the 1990s, *Computer Assisted Drawings: Proposal for Sony Corporation* (1992-93) comprises the use of SGI (SiliconGraphics) software to generate renderings of three-dimensional architectural spaces to be fitted with media displays of Sony products. Birnbaum formulated a special aluminum support structure to hold these images of duraclear prints and Plexiglas at a 90 degree angle from the support wall, so all can be seen semi-transparently and thus the viewer can formulate many montages of images when viewing.

Originally broadcast as a radio interruption during “soft news” on Swiss National Radio, *Operations: December 16-17-18* (1998) is a collaborative sound work (musical score by Stephen Vitiello) containing collaged live news reports heard in America as the U.S. initiated the bombing of Iraq.

Six single-channel video works will be thematically paired into couples to explore three essential aspects of Birnbaum’s artistic investigation.

*Chaired Anxieties: Abandoned* (1975) and *Mirroring* (1975) attempt to explore the separation between the body and its representation through repeated actions and camera manipulations. They are both linked to her early 1975 performative-based works. *Pop-Pop Video (General Hospital/Olympic Women Speed Skating)* (1980) and *Pop-Pop Video (Kojak/Wang)* (1980) are part of a series of works that evolved out of a residency at the Kitchen in New York. Appropriated television imagery and collaborative sound scores from downtown New York musicians are intercut into provocative dynamics. *New Music Shorts* (1981) emerged from Birnbaum’s engagement with the Lower Manhattan post-punk scene of the early 1980s. Whereas *Fire! Hendrix* (1982) was commissioned for a potential video disc of unreleased mixes of Jimi Hendrix’ songs. It criticized the economies of representation of sexuality and consumerism.

Employing both Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Urfaust* and Hector Berlioz’s opera *La damnation de Faust* as a touchstone, Birnbaum’s *Damnation of Faust Trilogy* (1983-87) is a highly structured and composed series evoking a free-floating, non-linear dreamscape. In this video work, Birnbaum investigated the conflicting forms of societal restraints and the individual struggles to define and express personal identities applying a feminist lens.

Her most recent piece *Journey: Shadow of the American Dream* (2022) demarcates the exhibition’s second part on the upper floor of the Osservatorio. This multichannel installation addresses the theme of memory, particularly the late 1940s/1950s postwar cultural landscape of Birnbaum’s childhood. It reflects, in the artist’s words, “a strong desire to review and bring to the viewer an understanding of growing up in this ‘shadow’ of World War II, the period when the American Dream was weaponized by the United States, after emerging ‘victorious’ from this world war.” In *Journey: Shadow of the American Dream*, Birnbaum travels from 1946, the year of her birth immediately following the cessation of World War II through 1954, by working with digitized 16mm footage taken by her father of

the earliest years of her life. Three large black-and-white vinyl photo blowups establish an architectural background for this period's history. The installation is completed by five video and sound channels presenting selected excerpts from television programs of the late 1940s and 1950s: from Groucho Marx' talk show to pioneering TV children's programs, from Westerns to sci-fi space odyssey films.

*Lesson Plans (To Keep the Revolution Alive)* (1977) is a structuralist-based work focusing on television language. Birnbaum took stills from prime-time television dramas— such as *Police Story* and *Crime Story*. She selected only the reverse angle shots, the most typical Western trope utilized in these types of programs, associating each still with the exact matching dialogues presented in each shot in order to arrest the TV production's relentless forward motion and scrutinize its invisible codes and hidden meanings.

*Transmission Tower: Sentinel* (1992) is an imposing installation commissioned by Jan Hoet, Director of DOCUMENTA IX. The minimal but massive sculpture consists of sections of a ROHN transmission tower from Peoria, Illinois. It includes eight monitors hanging in a curved vertical line from the tower structure. They show images of poet Allen Ginsberg reading his revised version of the poem *Hum Bom!* (1971 and revised in 1988) during the opening night of the 1988 National Student Convention at Rutgers University. A small inserted image box shows selections of President George H. W. Bush's acceptance speech at the 1988 Republican National Convention. All this footage falls downward sequentially on the monitors. Whereas, a third type of video image, coloured electronic green, always rising upward on the monitors and thus opposing the other sets of imagery, shows excerpts from meetings that comprised the student convention.

The exhibition is accompanied by an illustrated publication in the Quaderni series, published by Fondazione Prada, including an essay by the curator Barbara London and a conversation between Dara Birnbaum and the two associate curators Valentino Catricalà and Eva Fabbris.

"Dara Birnbaum" is the result of a partnership based on educational activities with the School of Digital Arts (SODA) in Manchester, UK.

**Press contacts**

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**Biographical notes**

Dara Birnbaum was born in 1946 in New York, where she continues to live and work. Dara Birnbaum received a Bachelor of Architecture degree from Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, a BFA in Painting from the San Francisco Art Institute and a Certificate in Video and Electronic Editing at the Video Study Center at the New School for Social Research, New York. Dara Birnbaum's pioneering video, media, and installation work has addressed the ideological and aesthetic character of mass media imagery over the past four decades and has been considered fundamental to our understanding of the history of media art. She was one of the first artists to design complex and innovative installations that juxtapose imagery from multiple sources while integrating three-dimensional elements—large-scale photographs, sculptural, or architectural elements—into the work. She is known for her groundbreaking strategies and for using manipulated television footage.

Birnbaum's work has been widely exhibited at MoMA, New York (2023); MoMA PS1, New York, US (2019); National Portrait Gallery, London, UK (2018); Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio, US (2018); South London Gallery, UK (2011); major retrospectives at the Hessel Museum of Art, New York, US (2022); Miller Insitutue of Contemporary Art, Pittsburgh, US (2022); the Serralves Foundation, Porto, Portugal (2010) and SMAK Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Gent, Belgium (2009); Center for Contemporary Art, CCA Kitakyushu, Japan (2009); Museum of Modern Art, New York, US (2008); Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna, Austria (2006); and The Jewish Museum, New York, US (2003). Her work was exhibited in Documenta 7, 8, and 9 in Kassel, Germany.

Birnbaum has been the recipient of various distinguished awards, such as the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship (2021); The Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center Arts Residency (2011); the Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant (2011); and the prestigious United States Artists Fellowship (2010). In 2016 she was recognized and honoured for her work by The Kitchen, New York, at their annual gala. She is the first woman to receive the prestigious Maya Deren Award from the American Film Institute in 1987. In February 2017, Carnegie Mellon University's School of Art created The Birnbaum Award in the artist's honour.