

**DARA BIRNBAUM**

# DARA BIRNBAUM: REVOLUTIONARY ACTS

BARBARA LONDON

Dara Birnbaum is an inspiring innovator, whose work retains its currency. In the 1970s, she appropriated images. In the 1980s, she stole images. In the 1990s, she sampled images. Today she continues to collaborate with talented editors and composers, as she refines the process of her masterful practice. As an artist who has laid the groundwork for emerging media art that will appear around the corner, Birnbaum stays several steps ahead.

Birnbaum's early work had a connection to her colleagues who became known as the "Pictures Generation," but she went on and approached appropriating images differently—and she stayed within the medium of video and critiqued the commercial side of the medium on its own terms. As Birnbaum would aspire to reach TV viewers at home through cable television, she started out with the goal of putting broadcast programs under the microscope for formal analysis. She created a series of works that dismantled television's conventional codes of representation in a powerful critique.

In the 1980s, Birnbaum forged ahead with video, as painting recaptured the art world's imagination. It was a dynamic time of change and colliding disciplines. Artists were exploring different opportunities and some started to show their videos in nightclubs rather than in dedicated art spaces. Dara Birnbaum used analogue video to document music performances. Her live footage with strong sound was at times assembled with frame-in-frame compositions of the performers and the audience. The artist went on to explore what she could create with the material she was shooting and recalibrate it as large-scale tableaux. During the first years of the 1980s, video editing was transitioning from analog systems. Birnbaum, like other artists, started to explore what the new digital equipment could do and drew upon her architecture and design skills, as she took her video and installation work to a larger scale.

Since the 1990s, the artist figured out how to present images of the complexity of what was going on, without her work or her subject becoming a spectacle. The complex question will always remain: in the mass media, who controls access to information and what is the point of view of the one who is interpreting it? Birnbaum feels strongly that with important historical moments there is as much hidden as there is being shown.

By 2000, Dara Birnbaum had to engage with the judicious upgrading of her early installations and videotapes, in light of hardware's perpetual advances and obsolescence. Judiciously maintaining the authenticity of the aesthetic concerns of her early work was made difficult as analog display equipment was shifting over to higher resolution digital gear. Analog's seemingly softer look and the graininess of earlier video works now required decisions about how to handle digital's new clarity. She needed to upgrade and remaster the original recording to match the new display equipment. Her legacy, as with others, is already being affected by decisions about how her artwork is carried forward.

Dara Birnbaum works organically, looking forward and back with time. For her, updating has meant staying on top of emerging technologies, as she has also continued to further her interests in music and in women's rights.

# THE EXHIBITION

This exhibition offers an understanding of the career and practice of Dara Birnbaum (New York, 1946), an artist who consistently has challenged the precepts of art and mass media for more than fifty years.

What is characteristic about Birnbaum is her ability to navigate the rising tides of new developments. She once pointed out that as tools and terminologies change, generations also do.

Curated by Barbara London, with Valentino Catricalà and Eva Fabbris, the exhibition showcases Birnbaum's own history and her ideology. Through a selection of single-channel videos, sound works, multi-channel installations, photographs, and 3D specialized prints on Plexiglas realized by the artist from 1975 to 2022, the visitor will be able to experience 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.

The exhibition path, conceived by Birnbaum for the two floors of Fondazione Prada's Osservatorio, 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.

*Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* (1978–79) is a video that the artist made by re-editing footage from the popular television program *Wonder Woman*. Exhibited at the building entrance, the work emphasizes how mass media alternates between heroic and trivializing representations of women and dismantles television's conventional codes of representation in a powerful critique.

On the 5th floor, the examination of forms of mass media narratives continues with works such as *Quiet Disaster* (1999) and *Damnation of Faust Trilogy* (1983–87), a highly structured and composed series, in which Birnbaum investigated the conflicting forms of societal restraints and the individual struggles to define and express personal identities applying a feminist lens.

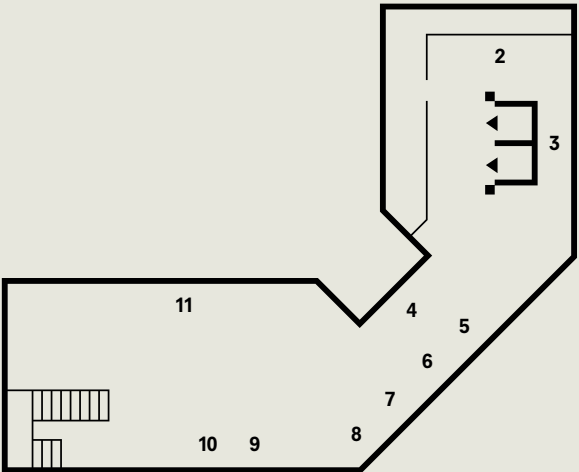
Six single-channel video works are thematically paired into couples to explore three essential aspects of Birnbaum's artistic investigation: the separation between the body and its representation through repeated actions and camera manipulations, the appropriation of television imagery and collaborative sound intercut into provocative dynamics, and the critics to the economies of representation of sexuality and consumerism.

Also presented are the collaborative sound work *Operations: December 16-17-18* (1998) and *Computer Assisted Drawings: Proposal for Sony Corporation* (1992–93), comprising the use of SGI (SiliconGraphics) software to generate renderings.

On the upper floor of the Osservatorio, the artist presents three installations, *Lesson Plans (To Keep the Revolution Alive)* (1977), *Transmission Tower: Sentinel* (1992), an installation commissioned for documenta IX, and her most recent piece *Journey: Shadow of the American Dream* (2022), a multichannel installation addressing the theme of memory, particularly the late 1940s/1950s post-war 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."

## FIFTH FLOOR



1

*Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman, 1978–79*  
5'50", color, stereo sound

Courtesy Dara Birnbaum and Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI),  
New York

(exhibited at the ground floor of the building)

Birnbaum analyzed the character of Wonder Woman, who had come to life in the 1940s as a Dell comic-book hero, seeing her as a male creation in an industry dominated by men. In her video work *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*, a secretary spins around and around to become a powerful, albeit skimpily clad superhero. Birnbaum relished how gender roles reverse when her heroine encounters a less-than-heroic male friend, who during a shoot-out hides again and again behind a column as she defends him. Birnbaum used the repeated burst of light, which back then was the only special effect used in that television program, in order to emphasize what appears to be the instantaneous change of the character into a super hero. Birnbaum utilized an extended play vinyl record by The Wonderland Band for a soundtrack constituting the second half of the work, with a chorus singing "Shake thy wonder maker" also punctuating Wonder Woman's moves as the lyrics scroll across a blue screen. When hearing the band's song *Wonder Woman Theme* on the radio for the first time, Birnbaum realized how closely the record and television industries were keeping pace with and capitalizing off of each other. Appropriating this disco song as soundtrack, she forged her revised vision of TV's Wonder Woman.

Birnbaum exhibited *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* in every possible way: on cable TV, opposite the actual Wonder Woman series; as a kinescope in various film

festivals, including one at the Kitchen; and on a TV monitor in the storefront window of H-Hair Salon de Coiffure, Inc. on Prince Street in Soho. A few years later she presented *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* during "Guerrilla Girl Night" at the Palladium, a nightclub opened in 1985 by impresarios Steve Rubell and Ian Schrager. For the spectacular evening, two large banks of monitors pneumatically dropped down from the ceiling, all compositing to show her *Wonder Woman* work. The event made for a splendid and unusual merger of art and spectacle.

2.

*Quiet Disaster*, 1999

Plexiglass with Duratrans prints, three panels

Courtesy Dara Birnbaum and Marian Goodman Gallery

For *Quiet Disaster*, Birnbaum utilized three enlarged anime images showing characters in peril, and printed them onto Plexiglas circular discs. Cropping the selected images to close-ups, and thus removed from their original context, she emphasized the idea of victimhood and how such actions can be portrayed in the media.

3.

*Operations: December 16-17-18*, 1998

CD (transferred to mp3), three United States army ammunition belts, headphones, Duraclear prints encased in Plexiglas

Reiteration for Fondazione Prada, 2023 (audio only)

Courtesy Dara Birnbaum and Marian Goodman Gallery

Originally broadcast as a radio interruption during 'soft news' on Swiss National Radio, *Operations: December 16-17-18* 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.

4.

*Computer Assisted Drawings: Proposal for Sony Corporation*, NYC, 1992/2017

16 UV prints on Plexiglas, custom aluminum frames, with stainless steel support structure

Courtesy Dara Birnbaum and Marian Goodman Gallery

Derived from an unrealized project from the 1990s, *Computer Assisted Drawings: Proposal for Sony Corporation* 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.

5.

*Six Movements: Chaired Anxieties: Abandoned*, 1975

5'15", black and white, silent

Courtesy Dara Birnbaum and Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York

Birnbaum's earliest videos explored the separation between the corporal body and its representation. The series *Six Movements* was motivated by having seen Vito Acconci's seductively edgy videotapes, many of which were directed toward the viewer as the 'Other,' specifically a female viewer. He would place himself in a central position in relation to the camera's eye, and would perform, acting out to the 'Other.' Birnbaum asked herself, "What would it be like to be a woman in this role?" She created a series of videos as 'exercises.'

*Chaired Anxieties: Abandoned* and *Mirroring* 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.

6.

*Six Movements: Mirroring*, 1975

6'01", black and white, silent

Courtesy Dara Birnbaum and Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York

Working off of Jacques Lacan's writing, *Mirroring* was Birnbaum's attempt to replace a mirror image of herself with the image of her 'corporal self,' through a repeated set of actions and manipulations of the camera. The piece begins by showing her face, which in fact is her reflection in a large mirror. She gazes out toward the viewer, toward the unseen camera. The camera captures what is both her mirror reflection and her out-of-focus body as she stands directly in front of the mirror. It takes time for the viewer to be able to distinguish which was her physical self, captured live by the camera, and which was her nearly identical reflection. In the last pass the mirror self is out of focus and the corporeal one now in focus.

7.

*Pop-Pop Video: General Hospital/Olympic Women Speed Skating*, 1980

6', color, stereo sound

Courtesy Dara Birnbaum and Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York

*Pop-Pop Video* evolved out of a residency at the Kitchen, where Birnbaum had been exposed to a screening of Jean-Luc Godard's experimental work for television, created with Anne-Marie Miéville. For Godard, audio was always equal to the visual. To create her project, Birnbaum was able to download through cable several popular programs from broadcast television. For *Pop-Pop Video: General Hospital/Olympic Women Speed Skating*, she cut between two sources—a special Olympics sports event (professional skaters switching lanes and swiftly returning again and again to the starting line)

and a daily daytime soap opera (where a conflicted couple, a male doctor and a female patient, try to reach an understanding). She played with repetition, and analyzed the syntax and gestures of what Birnbaum terms “TV treatment,” here “cross-cutting” as part of the editorial language of video. The soundtrack includes vocals by the jazz singers Dori Levine and Sally Swisher, instrumentation by Robert Raposo, and disco by Donna Summer.

8.

*Pop-Pop Video: Kojak/Wang, 1980*

3', color, stereo sound

Courtesy Dara Birnbaum and Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York

For *Pop-Pop Video: Kojak/Wang*, Birnbaum intercut *Kojak*, the popular crime drama, with a commercial for an early consumer computer made by Wang, then the biggest seller of computers in the world. In this way she joined commercial television with an actual TV commercial. Invited to participate, the avantgarde musician Rhys Chatham created a special version of his *Guitar Trio* for the work. Originally both parts were presented in the Kitchen's viewing room.

9.

*Fire!/Hendrix, 1982*

3'13", color, stereo sound

Courtesy Dara Birnbaum and Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York

Birnbaum's *Fire!/Hendrix* grew out of a gig that EAI's then director Eric Trigg procured of Jimi Hendrix songs that had never been released and whose rights were held by Hendrix's father after the musician's sudden death. In this work she avoided using off-air footage, and it meant that the new work had no rights issues, which opened it to be shown on broadcast or cable television.

10.

*New Music Shorts, 1981*

5'41", color, stereo sound

Courtesy Dara Birnbaum and Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York

Birnbaum used video to document live performances by various musicians. Her live footage with strong sound was at times assembled with frame-in-frame compositions of the performers and the audience. The raw intensity of the music, together with her close-ups and low-tech analogue visuals, offer insight into the post-punk scene. *New Music Shorts* features two different recorded sources. One was from what she shot at the Mudd Club of a gig by Radio Fire Fight (Jules Baptiste and Lefferts Brown). The second clip was from the iconoclastic composer Glenn Branca performing his *Symphony No. 1* at the Performing Garage, an alternative

theater space in Soho. Footage of Branca and his ensemble performing the propulsive symphony of amassed guitars and percussion is punctured with inserted images that link the performance inside with the stormy weather outside. Lightning and pounding rain provide a mesmerizing counterpoint to the thunderous percussion and driving guitars of Branca's radical music.

Birnbaum edited *New Music Shorts* and a subsequent music work *Sampler* (1981) at the small postproduction studio at Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), an early nonprofit distributor of artists' unlimited edition videos.

11.

*Damnation of Faust Trilogy*, 1983–87

Total running time: 22'18"

*Damnation of Faust: Evocation*, 1983

10'02", color, stereo sound

*Damnation of Faust: Will-O-The-Wisp (A Deceitful Goal)*, 1985

5'46", color, stereo sound

*Damnation of Faust: Charming Landscape*, 1987

6'30", color, stereo sound

Courtesy Dara Birnbaum and Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York

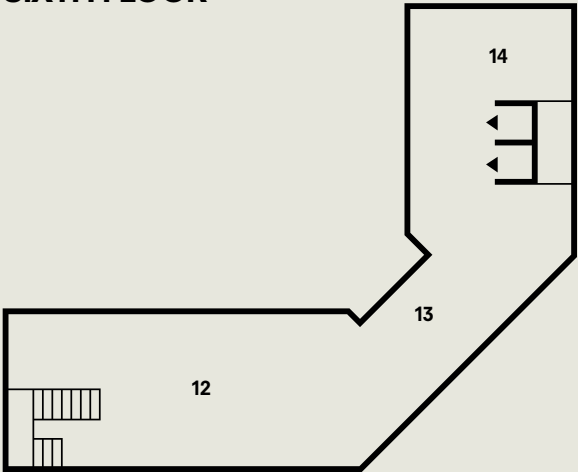
Frequently applying a feminist lens, Birnbaum looked at mass media, namely at its methods, point of view, and corporate control of the information flow. Using Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust* as a touchstone, her *Damnation of Faust Trilogy* is a highly structured and composed series evoking a free-floating, non-linear dreamscape. The broad themes of the work are conflicting forms of societal restraint and the struggles to define and express personal identity.

She turned to Hector Berlioz's opera, the *Damnation of Faust*, which he based on Goethe's *Faust*. What struck Birnbaum was that in the story the pure and innocent character Marguerite is seduced and then abandoned by Faust and suffers greatly. Thereby she remained powerless within her role in the story. Birnbaum set her updated version within a playground in her own Soho neighborhood, where generations of old Italian and Portuguese families had been living for decades in small apartment buildings. Birnbaum investigated the way this urban landscape becomes a place "where you lose your identity," and told her version of the Faust story in an abstracted way.

With each episode of the trilogy—*Evocation*, *Will-O'-the-Wisp (A Deceitful Goal)*, and *Charming Landscape*—she decided to develop both single-channel and installation versions for each of the segments of this work. At this point she chose to collaborate with professional editors and gain access to state-of-the-art, high-end postproduction studios, where mainly TV commercials were being edited. She turned to the Standby Program that had just been launched by Rick Feist and Alex Roshuk, out of their dedication to experimental video. Through Standby, Birnbaum and other artists, such as Juan Downey and Gary Hill, were able to experiment with broadcast standard tools, and in many cases, this advanced their video-making skills.



# SIXTH FLOOR



12

*Journey: Shadow of the American Dream, 2022*

6-channel video installation: 1 channel color, 5 channel black and white. Stereo sound with 5 channels mono sound.

3 vinyl murals (2 wall and 1 seating platform), black and white.

Projection:

original film footage (1946-1954) by Philip Birnbaum, father of the artist; 16mm film to 4K digital video, color, stereo, 35'43"

Video monitors:

*WABC TV American Broadcasting Company, 8' 27"*

*The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, directed by Ozzie Nelson, tinted black and white, mono, 3'42"

*The Lone Ranger*, created and produced by George W. Trendle, 4'12"

*CBS Television Network, 7'16"*

*Winky Dink and You, 4'31"*

*The Jack Benny Show, 2'15"*

*DuMont Presents, 6'25"*

*Captain Video and His Video Rangers*, a DuMont Presentation, 6'25"

*NBC Television Presents Kids' Programming, 9'25"*

*The Roy Rogers Show*, a Roy Rogers Production, 4'47"

*Howdy Doody*, presented by Puppet Playhouse, 4'7"

*NBC Television Presents Primetime Television, 11'33"*

*Dragnet*, a Mark VII Production, 4'50"

*You Bet Your Life Starring Groucho Marx*, presented by DeSoto Plymouth, 6'56"

3 vinyl murals (wall mounted and seating platform):

Aerial view, Levittown, Long Island, NY (c. 1947)

Street view, Levittown, Long Island, NY (c. 1947)

The Howard Apartments, Rego Park, Queens, NY (architect: Philip Birnbaum, built 1949)

Courtesy Dara Birnbaum and Marian Goodman Gallery. For the image on the seating platform: street view of homes in Levittown; Courtesy Special Collections Research Center, Temple University Libraries, Philadelphia, PA. For the images on wall:

Queens Boulevard. Carrol [Men.] Apartments, general view of three buildings, Courtesy of Wurts Bros. (x2010.7.1.9910), Museum of the City of New York; aerial view of the Levittown: photo by

Ed Latcham / © Everett Collection / Bridgeman Images.

Created with support from the Miller Institute for Contemporary Art at Carnegie Mellon University.

Recently Birnbaum's critical inquiry moved in a new direction, with a slight turn towards autobiography. *Journey: Shadow of the American Dream* is a multichannel installation that explores memory, in particular the late 1940s/1950s postwar culture of her own childhood. She had a "strong desire to reacquaint herself with and bring to the viewer some insight regarding 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." Three large black-and-white photo blowups on vinyl establish an architectural background for this period's history. In the aftermath of World War II, building opportunities in the areas around New York City burgeoned. The large mural image on one wall is that of the Howard Apartments, completed in 1952 in Rego Park, Queens, where Birnbaum and her family once lived. The two other large images are views of the idealistically-driven housing development Levittown. Built in what originally was a quiet hamlet in Nassau County, Levittown was planned and constructed from 1947 to 1951. The settlement was built for returning veterans and today is considered one of the first mass-produced suburbs in the United States.

Carefully positioned in *Journey: Shadow of the American Dream* are six separate channels of video and sound that permeate the gallery space. Five channels present carefully selected excerpts from television programs of the late 1940s and 1950s. This is when American families were switching from listening to radio together to watching television, as programming formats of each solidified. *Journey* features a range of early broadcast television programs judiciously sourced by Birnbaum: including former radio personalities like Groucho Marx (of the comedic Marx Brothers cinema fame), who hosted his wiseacre TV talk show; pioneering TV children's programs, such as "Howdy Doody," created and hosted by the former radio announcer Buffalo Bob Smith, with his puppet; Westerns and other films that supplied broadcast channels with much needed program content; and sci-fi space odyssey films, fostered by Cold War tensions and the space race, feeding the general interest in space exploration.

At the heart of the installation are digitalized transfers of 16mm home movies taken by Birnbaum's father at moments during her childhood. This includes documents of the artist's first steps, early birthdays, and festive family gatherings. It is often said that childhood is the land of memory and possibility, and that years later events, such as those featured in *Journey*, can assume monumentality in an individual's memory, and become a foreshadowing of the present. The artist appears to be encouraging viewers to reconsider the impact, relevance, importance, and universality of their own memories. The internal views of oneself develop out of lived experience are interwoven with both external and internal information.

13.

*Lesson Plans (To Keep the Revolution Alive)*, 1977

Two sets of black-and-white photographs and text panels

Courtesy Dara Birnbaum and Marian Goodman Gallery

Having been lent copies of *Screen Magazine* by Dan Graham, and having read academic theorists, such as Christian Metz, on film language and film theory, Birnbaum realized no one was writing, or talking about, television, an important subject for her. She created *Lesson Plans (To Keep the Revolution Alive)*, a structuralist-based work regarding television and its language. She took stills from prime-time television dramas such as *Medical Hospital* and *Crime Story*. She based the work solely on reverse angle shots, the most typical Western trope utilized in these types of programs.

The stills she shot came from these dramas that at the time were broadcast over five different weekday nights by the dominant broadcast-TV channels, and selected a series of classic reverse-angle shots for each of the five segments that constitute this work. She believed that the TV dialogue went by so fast viewers could glean only an intimation of what was being said. Thus, for *Lesson Plans*, Birnbaum distilled the essence of both the visual image and the spoken text that was there. Thus, each captured visual image is also paired with a text panel, presenting the exact matching dialogue.

14.

*Transmission Tower: Sentinel*, 1992

8-channel video installation (color, 8-channel stereo sound, 2'48" loop), ROHN® transmission tower, custom-designed hardware

Courtesy Dara Birnbaum and Marian Goodman Gallery

*Transmission Tower: Sentinel* is an imposing installation-sculpture that was commissioned by documenta IX and the legendary curator and museum director Jan Hoet. Birnbaum's minimal but massive installation with an actual ROHN transmission tower brought in from Peoria, Illinois, frames the eight small monitors that hang vertically from the tower's frame. Cascading images, in a waterfall effect, are segments of the poet Allen Ginsberg reading his revised version of the poem *Hum Bom!* (1971) on opening night of the 1988 National Student Convention at Rutgers University. A small inserted video image features President George H.W. Bush giving his acceptance speech at the 1988 Republican National Convention, and is inserted into footage of Ginsberg's poetry reading. A third type of video image, tinted green and streaming up the monitors, in a counter-flow, shows excerpts of the lively meetings occurring during the student convention.

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