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# BOMB

*Dara Birnbaum & Matt Saunders*

By Chris Chang (July 6, 2016)



*Dara Birnbaum. Psalm 29(30), 2016, six-channel video and sound installation, color, 8 minutes, loop. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery. Photo by Rebecca Fannele.*

Depictions of trauma can be blunt, oblique, and sometimes even both. In many cases, trauma is simply beyond representation. In two separate, simultaneous exhibitions at Marian Goodman Gallery in Paris, artists Dara Birnbaum and Matt Saunders explored the terrain of such upheaval and strain—be it world conflict, personal illness, rising seas, or inside the image itself.

Birnbaum and Saunders may seem, *prima facie*, worlds apart. Birnbaum, for over four decades, has been a master of media intervention. Her video *Technology//Transformation: Wonder Woman* (1978–79) is a cornerstone of avant-garde and feminist canons. Saunders's camera-less photographs and animated films deliberately dissolve media boundaries, creating a space where painting, photography, and film question their own specificity. But at the gallery and in this conversation, which took place May 4, 2016, their pairing felt completely symbiotic.

Chris Chang Could you both briefly describe your work, specifically in terms of the titles?

Dara Birnbaum *Psalm 29(30)*. It's a Psalm I heard maybe a few times, but most importantly, when Pope Francis came to St. Patrick's, it was sung at Vespers. It hit me deeply. I like the cadence and its message. It is, in part, a direct call to God—if that's what you believe in—

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that asks for help, asks for healing. The work I was doing in Paris is maybe more personal than most work I've done. I'd undergone what I experienced as a traumatic situation in 2014. The origins come from there, and the Psalm is just one of the sources of this work.

CC Is it too personal to ask what the traumatic situation was?

DB I needed what became life-threatening surgery. When you break open inside, parts go where they don't belong, and the idea was to get the pieces back together again, almost like an artwork. I felt I was on a very precarious edge, and things like Psalm 29(30) were comforting agents. I was in the hospital at the same time as the Syrian Civil War in 2014, footage of which I decided to use in the new work. It was very strange to be in a kind of life-or-death situation in isolation, but also to know of that kind of trauma in the outside world. It's an external world that you have hardly any ability to affect, but you're affected by it.

CC Matt, can you explain a little about your work, also by way of its title?

Matt Saunders *Inondé*, which means flooded or overwhelmed—inundated. I took it from a source image—a postcard depicting the flooding of Paris in 1910—but the topic has an earlier, more personal origin: a work of mine that was ruined by Hurricane Sandy. It's a silver gelatin print, a very "liquid" image from a painted negative, on which I poured the developing chemistry, applying it by hand, part of a series of images forming and dissolving. The hurricane achieved much more than I could have ever hoped for! I later got it back from the gallery, and it's the only thing that's been hanging continuously in my studio since.



Matt Saunders. *Paris 1910 (Verison 1)*, 2016, c-print. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery.

CC Wait, just where was this photo during the hurricane?

MS It was in a basement in Chelsea. The water rose a third of the way up the image, lifted off the entire surface, then deposited it back, with rivulets and flood lines. It's a humbled object, an exciting object. I figure it represents something very central to my work, which is finding ways to overrun boundaries. Letting go of something, catching it again, so that risk and chance and other forces come into play. This one picture was a perfect expression of that.

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CC Is there a poetic interplay between your two shows? Was it planned?

DB We had a talk. We both work with the same director at the Marian Goodman Gallery, Jessie Washburne-Harris.

MS She knew of my long interest in Dara's work, and I was delighted at the idea. But in terms of specific coordination? Only indirectly.

CC Well, I'm thinking more in terms of a dialectic maybe.

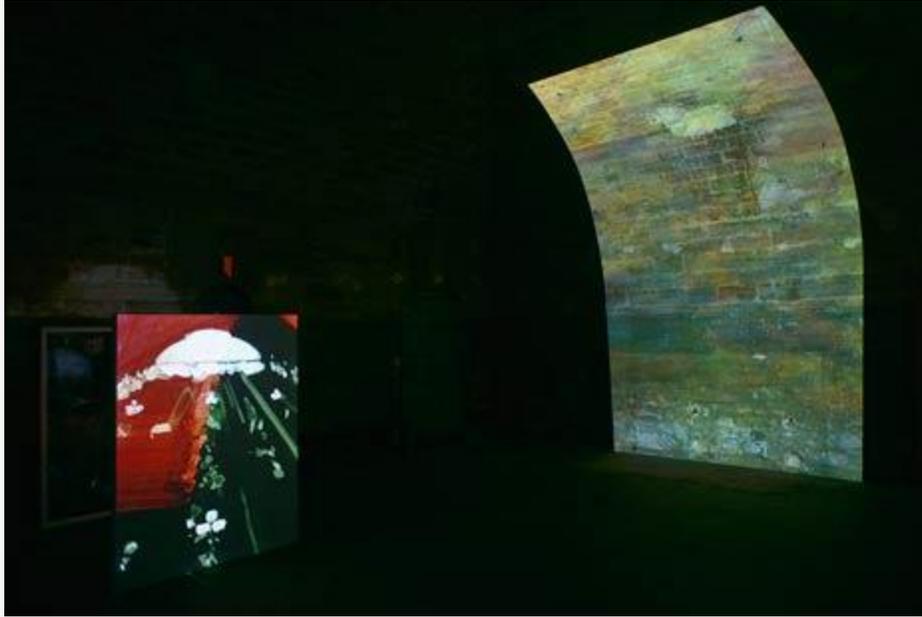
DB We both play with the exploratory nature of media and mediums. And personally, I think the Paris gallery is a more experimental ground than the New York or London locations. There's a little more allowance for poetics, let's say, and for us to be who we are, because we're not under the same pressure as we might be in New York.

MS I agree with that absolutely.

CC Is there, perhaps, a "core" component to both these shows—where the center is this Syrian imagery inside an enclosure, or, in Matt's case, this abstract film separated from the things around it? Is there "satellite" imagery, with images of the Alps surrounding the Syrian imagery, then static images surrounding Matt's film?

MS I knew that Dara was working on an installation with an interior and an exterior, and I was certainly thinking about that. Recently, I've often put moving and still images in a relationship, staged together and interwoven. Picking up on what Dara's saying about the experimental feeling in Paris, I've always loved the vault room deep in the basement of the gallery and felt there was a chance to build a film directly engaged with that space and the conditions of the installation. Instead of having a mingled balance of still and moving images, I wanted to present a much more formal, static, cleaned-up installation of stills, then an antic heart off to the side with a different kind of energy. The film installation works to deconstruct a lot of the formal framing. It was also very important that it be silent. I knew sound was an integral part of Dara's piece, and I felt that the space under that, the cellar of her show, could play on the opposite. So I was thinking about having a relationship as a kind of shadow or understructure of hers.

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*Matt Saunders. Exhibition view of Inondé, Marian Goodman Gallery, Paris. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery.*

CC Dara, please tell us about your sound.

DB Well, it creates the whole atmosphere for the work. I worked with a composer, and the idea was to make two different sound zones, and in fact there is a room built within the gallery—

CC The core or heart?

DB Yes. I would refer to it as the chamber, but it was always for me the *heart* chamber. The sound started with the Gregorian chant version of the Psalm, and it meant a lot to me that it was chanted by the monks of La Grande Chartreuse from Southern France—whom are sworn to silence. They only use their voices for chanting or prayer.

We used that as a prime source material, but Neil Benezra, who did the sound compositions, built upon that. I wanted a very meditative or calming atmosphere, something that is not present in most gallery or institutional spaces right now. But that's not to say I wanted it solemn or religious. It's minimal, not big and shouting out at you—like setting a plateau amongst those images of mountains seen in the videos in a very serene way. Then you can enter into the secondary space, the heart chamber, which is soundproofed from the rest of the gallery space.

CC Primary or secondary?

DB I don't see one without the other, so maybe I just went in order. Neither has importance without the other. You enter the chamber and there is the war imagery. The whole goal was to see if I could again approach work that has a political basis or that specific kind of consciousness. It was very important to challenge myself to directly use war imagery.

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I was thinking of Susan Sontag's *Regarding The Pain of Others*. How can one express the horrific side of what's going on in our society without it being a spectacle? The idea is that this outer environment can put you into a different state of receivership, and then you would see the imagery and feel it—without being overwhelmed or hit over the head by it.

MS It's extremely effective. You feel this bodily when you go between the spaces. It's almost barometric—not only the sound and the images are different, the whole air is different.

CC Your ears pop, as it were.

MS It's a bit confrontational the way you feel shocked by the change, but you acclimate to the interior space, and when you come out, the landscapes are strong. It's a shock to return to them.

CC Can I suggest trauma as an entry point connecting the two installations?

DB It comes from, in part, personal trauma as well as the trauma of military conflict. That kind of life-or-death moment, for me, really offers a different clarity or perspective. You become aware, seeing things in a hyper-real way, or a larger way than normal.



*Dara Birnbaum. Psalm 29(30), 2016, six-channel video and sound installation, color, 8 minutes, loop. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery. Photo by Rebecca Fanuele.*

MS Your personal trauma that underlies the piece—do you want that to be visible?

DB I don't feel it's important. I did mention it in the press release, so it's there if you want it. But it simply created a state that made me want to move forward in my art and challenge

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myself with questions such as, What is solemnity? What is pain? Or, how can one be in touch with the pain of others?

CC And Matt, in your case—subtextual information. How important is it?

MS First, my "subtext" is much less traumatic than Dara's experience. I think in general that work has to be experienced in the present. The information is there, but it's not a key. It doesn't decode anything.

CC Matt's film has been labeled "abstract." Is that true? To me, abstraction means either Hans Hofmann, or an abstraction from nature. Your work seems more an abstraction apart from reality.

MS It's the most abstract to date, in that there are only three tiny sections of clear "representation." The animation and half of the pictures in the show are "abstract" but they are also drawn in a way from nature—from film work, from process. I make abstract drawings as passages of animation, trying to spatialize ideas of rhythm, imagining timing and syncopation as I work on long, rolled out scrolls. There's a lot of specific thinking about the temporality of a distance of drawing and then the materials of it. The abstract pictures in the show are made with these drawings, too. Being in moving image work doesn't exhaust their identity or potential energy. I'm re-appropriating, also re-approaching material from past projects.



Matt Saunders. *Mulbolland*, 2016, c-print. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery.

CC Dara, when you shot the video footage of the Alps, what was the plan?

DB The footage was shot in 2011, during a residency at the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Center, for what I thought would be a different work. I hit a wall with that other work. In 2016, when I looked back, I suddenly thought the footage made sense because this landscape of the foothills of the Alps can be generalized and could provide the new work with a particular atmosphere. It's the same with the Syrian war footage—it can be generalized as representing the horrors of most any war. It's not specifically showing ISIS or certain things that we've been exposed to on TV, like people crouched in terror, their heads

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coming off. I haven't dealt with that, but rather with a lost landscape where you see complete ruin. And you don't even know why these isolated people—they're barely brigades—are combing the landscape for something else to destroy when everything else around them already looks destroyed. It's interesting because, having worked in a medium like video for almost forty years I did a lot with appropriation. I'm curious as to why I'm not necessarily challenging the image more—how it performs as digital information flow, what its framing is, what its capabilities are. Rather I'm using the image without manipulating it beyond slow motion and minimum effects.

CC Is that because you're getting mellower?

DB I'm getting something-er. (*laughter*) Maybe it's a kind of acceptance of the image.

CC Syria is still a dagger in the heart.

DB It is. Several of my works have taken place at a precise moment, like *Tiananmen Square: Break-In Transmission* or *Transmission Tower: Sentinel*, and I've had people saying to me that this is going to be yesterday's news. But I feel these are important historical moments. Syria was also at war thousands of years ago, and the whole region has been tumultuous over centuries, but there are certain touchstones. Even in the last few months, all of a sudden, Syria has re-emerged in the news in a horrific way. And I'm curious as to how that's interplaying with this new work.

MS One of the legacies of your work has been to frame the delivery of media imagery, to make it visible. Here, you went to great trouble to erase the logos and much of the metadata, which has a really surprising effect. It almost reclaims a kind of landscape vision. It's urgent and strange imagery, and especially disconcerting not to see the stamp on it since you've erased a bracket that we've come to regard as natural.

DB I've taken away the source—that was a bit of a preventative measure. I didn't know at first whether I would keep the insignias, since they seemed to frighten many people. I was actually asked by the gallery to take that into consideration.

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Dara Birnbaum. *Psalm 29(30)*, 2016, six-channel video and sound installation, color, 8 minutes, loop. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery. Photo by Rebecca Fanuele.

MS Is it now more powerful to strip things down?

DB With media, there's as much hidden as there is shown today. There are all kinds of surveillance and parameters we can easily read and some we know nothing about. And these are the shadow images of what is contained, especially in places like the mass media.

CC I'm reminded of the title of your retrospective.

DB *Dark Matter of Media Light*.

CC Dark matter's not necessarily a bad thing.

DB No, not at all. It might be a force that holds everything together that we can't quite see.

CC Klaus Theweleit. Can you, Matt, explain his significance to your show?

MS Well, it's a point of reference among several. Theweleit's a German writer whose book *Male Fantasies* grappled with the cultural products of the proto-Nazi *Freikorps* movement, the de-mobbed and then re-mobbed militia groups.

This may be where this show is personal, as I've gone back recently to reread things like Theweleit. It's about the creation of an anxious worldview, framed by fear and fantasy, and he organizes the book around the impact of metaphoric images, for instance the Flood—those afraid of rising tides fixating on walls and "strength." The rock versus the swamp. America, as an analogy, now seems to be in a time when the waters are rising for many people, metaphorically and literally. It's straight out of Theweleit, but these metaphors don't have to be harnessed to the same end.

We've been talking about trauma. My work being destroyed by Hurricane Sandy: it was traumatic to the work materially, but it was cathartic for me. I've always thought of

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submitting to the current as the most positive thing—a way of dissolving into these forces. The idea of immigration and losing a citadel of old stability seems like an exciting project for the future. The city repurposed as a canal is a beautiful and profound image, but it's an image of disaster.

*Since her first solo exhibition in New York City at Artists Space in 1977, Dara Birnbaum has had solo shows at the Museum of Modern Art (2007), the Jewish Museum, New York (2004), Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna (2006 and 1995), Institut Valencià d'Art Modern, Valencia (1990), and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (1984). In 2009–2010, a major retrospective exhibition, "Dara Birnbaum: The Dark Matter of Media Light," was presented at Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Ghent, which also traveled to the Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Serralves, Porto. Birnbaum's work has been included in the Venice Biennale and Documenta, Kassel, among many other group exhibitions and festivals. She currently teaches at the School of Visual Arts in New York City.*