

# BOMB

Dara Birnbaum

By Karen Kelley and Barbara Schröder

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Dara Birnbaum, *Hostage*, 1994, partial installation view at Paula Cooper Gallery, six-channel color video with five stereo-channels, audio, interactive laser, custom-designed mounts, Plexiglas shields. Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

Dara Birnbaum's deconstructive investigation of mass-media conventions and idioms has proven influential and enduring since she began showing her work in the late '70s. This is why we enthusiastically agreed to work with Birnbaum on preparing the first comprehensive catalogue of her work in English for her upcoming touring retrospective at S.M.A.K. in Ghent. The dearth of in-depth scholarship focusing on Birnbaum's work was remarkable to us. From our first research excursions into Birnbaum's vast archive in her New York City studio, we encountered materials both anticipated and surprising. There were the instantly recognized clips from superhero cartoons, scripts, and storyboards from her celebrated single-channel videos, and myriad xeroxes of graphics that appear in the startling imagery of the later installations. However, the precise renderings from her early architectural career and

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the skillful but more private self-portraits and drawings highlighted other nuanced perspectives. Exceedingly articulate and exacting, Birnbaum doesn't sacrifice humor or sentiment. Especially invigorating, in this current political climate, is her visual and intellectual acuity, her feminism, her criticality, and her ability to re-present our culture in ways that awaken us to the repercussions of our own passive consumption.



Dara Birnbaum, still from *Pop-Pop Video*, 1980, color video with sound, 9 minutes. Courtesy of Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York.

**Karen Kelley** Is the process of sifting through your archives for the retrospective and catalogue evoking certain memories or is it bringing to light thematic developments you had not realized before?

**Dara Birnbaum** As you've experienced by being there with me, I've had mixed feelings about going through my archives. The earlier works seem to have a type of organization that's not reflected in the later works. I wouldn't say that my working process has changed, but it is amazing to see that the early archives seem more organized—better materials and more cohesion within them.

**KK** Does that have to do with your moving from primarily single-channel works to more elaborate installations?

**DB** I've always had a desire to be like an investigative reporter, to delve into subject matter and content and read profusely. You have more of that luxury when you're young. Maybe

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the truth is that it's also the difference between the time periods when I first returned to New York, in 1975, and now. I had stopped working in architecture and environmental design with Lawrence Halprin & Associates in San Francisco. That was a very hard thing to do; it was made even harder as I was the only woman to graduate in my class at Carnegie Mellon University and *then* chose to drop out. I went to the San Francisco Art Institute and graduated in painting. Then, in approximately '73 or '74, I left the United States to live in Florence. I was painting in this Renaissance city and yet that's where I found video. It was there that a woman I fortunately met, Maria Gloria Bicocchi, had started an art gallery called Centro Diffusione Grafica. In '74 and '75 a lot of artists were coming through her gallery, like Vito Acconci, Dan Graham, Dennis Oppenheim, Charlemagne Palestine, and Joan Jonas. Her gallery allowed the space, time, and equipment for these artists to do some of their earlier video work. And by hanging around the gallery and feeling quite alone in Florence and being very *lonely*, the gallery started to form a home base for me. I had grown up in New York City, but in Florence you could view great art more closely within a much smaller urban scale. Thus, it was easier for me to have the chance to meet these artists firsthand. They were very warm toward me. I was in awe because I hadn't seen this type of work, and it was this type of work that suddenly stimulated me. I went back to New York, a year later, and someone lent me my first Portapak. My early archives also show the amount of time, energy, and patience that I could give to note-taking, to thinking, to reading. And it was a time in New York City when I could get a loft, to live and work in, for \$125 per month. I worked as a waitress about three nights a week and the rest of the time was open for everything that might interest me.

**Barbara Schröder** The archives also show an awareness of the importance of keeping things. We have found, for example, napkins with coffee stains on which you drew your first sketches for exhibition installations. What you kept back then is not just a record of your working process itself, but everything related to that process, for example xeroxes of texts important to you. The '70s have been described as the decade of archive fever, a time when, for example—Franklin Furnace—the archive for artists' independent publications, and the Lesbian Herstory Archive were founded in New York City. I think the significance of the archive in that moment must have played a role in shaping what you saved.

**DB** I agree; one of the first art books I read was Lucy Lippard's *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1969 to 1972*. Just as the object nature of contemporary art was dematerializing, there was that feeling of reaching for and retaining any active or expressive moment of one's work as a recorded vestige. For example, in Florence, Schema Gallery had a show of Acconci, which included photographs that were performance-oriented. One showed him laying his body over a gully in the earth, forming a human bridge. However, the real *buzz* was about his coming over to do an actual performance in the gallery. For that performance, Acconci created a café-like atmosphere in the gallery, with small tables and chairs. I had never seen anything like that before. I didn't understand what was going on, what and where the boundaries were. Yet there was a film crew and a still photographer *at the ready*. I remember because later on the photographer gave me some of the images he had shot of this performance. So, while artists were *gesturing* at dematerialization they, or their galleries, were also retaining proof that these ephemeral moments of performance existed.

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Dara Birnbaum, still from *Pop-Pop Video*, 1980, color video with sound, 9 minutes. Courtesy of Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York.

**BS** It seems like you used to think by way of drawing and documenting. For your early single-channel videos, for example, you have scripts that show how you developed your ideas. You were thinking spatially and not just in a narrative way.

**DB** I really miss drawing. Some of the things we've uncovered—for example that self-portrait on a small watercolor pad—they're irreplaceable. The more I did video, the less I was involved with drawing. I started to get enticed by the quickness and speed of video. It felt like playing a game of chess: everything was in your mind; you had to be six moves ahead, and when you put those moves into action, that's when you saw the reality and the dynamic results.

**BS** We actually found drawings you made of a chess game from different perspectives.

**DB** I probably stopped drawing as a regular activity because I *had* to, in order for the video to take over.

**KK** The earliest influences you've mentioned—Acconci, Graham, Nauman—happen to all be male. How did you break away from them to interpret video as a medium that was well suited to work by female artists? Or, that could relate so well to a feminist practice in the arts?

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**DB** Well, at the beginning, when many of us started to take up video there was a lot of talk like, “Oh, it’s a new medium and women are new to the arts and therefore it’s a good match.” But I’m not sure of that. As someone who has included feminist strategies and statements within my work, why do I constantly mention male artists as forming the basis of my influence? I haven’t gotten at that yet. It might be that the type of mythology and symbology expressed within works by well-known female artists, such as Joan Jonas, had less effect on me than structuralist-oriented work or the exploration of popular culture, as with early works by Dan Graham. That’s what I was most interested in. But it quickly became important for me to express such concerns through role identification with women, therefore a work like *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* emerged.

In *Kiss the Girls: Make Them Cry*, I used female stereotypes from the TV game show *Hollywood Squares* — actresses whose careers had mostly faded. The tic-tac-toe grid of the stage-set is almost like a disco floor in its patterning and use of highly visual and manipulated lighting. That’s why I mixed and mashed this top game show, *Hollywood Squares*, to the top disco songs at that time. They just completely go together. I chose three strong female character types, each with different identities, from *Hollywood Squares* — a blonde, a brunette, and a child. Each has a very regulated and affected way of presenting themselves. Taken out of context, the gestures are so unreal, and yet they are gestures they’ve chosen to act out in order to reach an audience of millions. In a previous work, *Lesson Plans: To Keep the Revolution Alive*, I also presented stereotypical television images, both of men and women. The women in those crime-drama TV episodes that I selected are always questioning their own abilities or identity. For instance, when a male doctor turns to a female doctor, the female says, “I don’t know what to do,” or, “What do you think?” It’s about distrust of one’s own thoughts, perceptions, and feelings.

## MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY



Dara Birnbaum, *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*, 1978–1979, color video with sound, 5 minutes, 50 seconds. Courtesy of Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York.

**BS** So would you say that you departed from Acconci, Nauman, or Graham in terms of subject matter? You are dealing with the construction of femininity, with self-expression and visibility. Did video seem the right medium for this subject?

**KK** Those artists also opened up video as a medium in which to conduct a psychological investigation, though you take this to explore female identity.

**DB** That's interesting, especially in relation to my earliest works, where you see the use of my own body. My very early tapes seem affected by a perception of psychological space, as portrayed in Acconci, but from a female perspective. I had observed that with Acconci's work the woman was basically used, entrapped, seduced. As enticed and seduced by these works as I was, I also felt the necessity to break from that male position. For example, an early work that hasn't been distributed and which we might include in the retrospective at the Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst (S.M.A.K.) in Ghent is *Mirroring*. It was the period when many artists started to read Lacan. It did interest me that Acconci's sorts of seductions were directed out toward an anonymous viewer, who in fact could almost always be assumed as female. That's probably why, as a woman, I went for a position of self-inquiry. *Mirroring* is an attempt to see one's mirror-self and replace it with the real, through a repeat set of actions and through manipulation of the camera.... And from that the work evolved to this super-woman in *Wonder Woman*!

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**BS** Where a woman is literally trying to cut through her own mirror image.

**KK** You've also described that as a *breakage* — the woman trying to break through.

**DB** Of course, if you're feeling insecure, whom are you going to run to for help or support? A super-mother, an Amazonian super-woman: primitive, moral, and ethical. There's also another purposeful strategy that I have not talked about previously, and that is the image of men included in works like *Drift of Politics*, *Kiss the Girls*, and *Wonder Woman*. In *Wonder Woman*, she meets a guy who is really timid; he hides behind a column and she defends him. In *Drift of Politics*, any time a man enters into the frame, the shot goes white. There's an inability to deal with the presence of a man interfering with or occupying space.



Dara Birnbaum, *Kiss the Girls: Make Them Cry*, 1979, color video with sound, 6 minutes, 50 seconds. Courtesy of Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York.

**KK** You were talking about *Kiss the Girls* and how these women are struggling to express themselves while imprisoned by the grid. I'm wondering if you see them as being in or out of control within their representations. Are they hopelessly imprisoned?

**DB** No, the tic-tac-toe board is simply another reference to when I grew up. The post-war baby boom created a middle class that spent a lot of time in their little *boxes*, their homes. These representations in *Hollywood Squares* seemed to take this signifier further. TV heightens, flattens, and makes more homogenous what's already happening out there; therefore it becomes even more highly symbolic. The stage-set for *Hollywood Squares* is not

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## MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

that different than placing people in very similar houses along a suburban track of housing. The actors and actresses who appear on *Hollywood Squares* in all likelihood will not be huge stars again; their identity also has become that much more homogenous. The stage-set they sit within highlights them but also neutralizes them. It's like a wall between neighbors in the suburbs, where everyone superficially seems to have the same status. When you isolate TV imagery from its context—out of its flow—you see the extreme types of exaggerations that occur in order to try and establish some form of identity.

**KK** It's in the disruption then that you can start to...

**DB** ...read it.

**KK** You freeze television moments again in *Hostage*.

**DB** No, *Hostage* is not frozen; it's more about getting at essences of material that came from television and news reportage. I then edited highly selective sequences into short, repeat loops. Each loop epitomizes a segment of what were components of the Red Army Faction (RAF) hostage situation, in 1977, with Hanns-Martin Schleyer. There are six video channels, one of which is composed solely of newspaper clippings on this event published in this country, and that information goes by very quickly. When viewers are aligned directly with the monitors, they're actually targeted by a laser beam and that laser beam *freezes* the sixth channel, which is the newspaper archival footage. Then you can finally read it.

**BS** The complex meanings of being a hostage or being imprisoned also appear in your earlier works, where being in front of the camera means being able to express yourself and being visible, but at the same time being somehow entrapped. Let's talk about *Hostage*, because it involves a historical moment in television as well, when the radical organization RAF released a videotape of the hostage Hanns-Martin Schleyer to the media. In your installation you also see the prison cells that housed members of the Baader-Meinhof gang. And at the same time, the viewer is captured in the gallery space, as the laser is pinpointed on her or his body. So there seems to be a multilayered moment of entrapment—psychologically, physically, and spatially.

**KK** We're talking about the paradoxes of entrapment.

**DB** The impetus for *Hostage* was a group show in Linz, Austria, called *The Foreigner/The Guest*. The curators strongly suggested topics for the artists, and Hanns-Martin Schleyer's name was on this list...it caught my attention. I had read, in a short essay by Baudrillard, about the situation with Schleyer, who had been kidnapped by the RAF and forced to say on videotape that he was an enemy of the state. Baudrillard wrote that the minute this footage was televised, Schleyer himself, his life, became devalued. Through the medium of broadcast, he had been used for all he was worth. After that the RAF decided to kill him, which wasn't readily anticipated. Then you have the other half of the equation, the deaths of the Baader-Meinhof gang members in their prison cells, supposedly by their own hand.

In *Hostage*, as the artist, I am able to control the parameters of the installation, and so the targeting of the viewer comes into play. If you want to see all the channels of the video

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## MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

footage directly on, a laser is going to be pointed at you. If another viewer outside of that configuration is watching, they'll see you targeted. They may ask themselves: Where does my responsibility towards such things start or end? It attempts to get away from the passive viewing, which is typical of entertainment.



Dara Birnbaum, *Canon: Taking to the Streets, Part One: Princeton University—Take Back the Night*, 1990, color video with sound, 10 minutes. Courtesy of Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York.

**BS** Many sketches in the archive show how carefully you considered the movement of the viewer while planning your installations.

**DB** I have continued to question passive viewing in my later works, such as the large-scale outdoor project *Rio Videowall*, commissioned for the public plaza of a newly designed shopping complex in Atlanta. It was an interactive work—but a simple type of interaction, as compared to the complexity of what can happen now. When pedestrians, or shoppers, would enter the plaza, they crossed the sight lines of two cameras. Technically, their bodily presence electronically constructs a keyhole within the imagery currently on display. In other words, the absence of their bodily presence—the negative space of the keyhole—becomes extended over a large surface, which is a digital composite of 25 monitors.

**KK** There are all these levels of time involved: past time, the time of the landscape, and the media-time of CNN, not just the time of your own body.

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## MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

**DB** The wall was housed in a protective structure covered by black-spandrel glass, which reflected the entirety of the plaza. It was also able to receive satellite imagery from CNN, whose home base is Atlanta. The monitors usually displayed images of what this exact site previously had been—a park with beautiful old magnolia trees. Arquitectonica designed the Rio Complex as a bright blue U-shaped building, with a public plaza, which differed considerably in appearance from the local architecture. When this shadow sense of self, a person's silhouette, comes up on the video wall, it is then filled in with the news of the moment from CNN. However, you're totally out of control of *what* CNN news, through the keyhole formed by your body, is bringing in—it's like opening Pandora's box. Eventually the entirety of the plaza was redesigned. So, instead of remaining as a permanent installation, it too became an electronic memory.

**BS** By introducing the *flâneur* into *Rio Videowall*, you are also introducing visibility even if it's just through the silhouette, or shadow. You said in an interview that when you were practicing environmental design and architecture, in San Francisco, it was a time when what counted most, politically, was visibility on the streets, when visibility and empowerment were very closely related. You're dealing with this in other works, such as *Canon: Taking to the Streets*.

**DB** I was deeply affected by living in Berkeley in the early '70s. Previously, I assisted in organizing a few antiwar marches in New York City. I was growing up at a time when crowds were a point of power and when visibility was all-important. For me this time also produced essential moments within television history—for instance during the Democratic Convention in Chicago, in '68. The convention was happening inside, but the protesters outside that hall became so important that for the first time reporters and photographers realized that what they should be shooting was in the street. A man, as he was being beaten to the ground by the police, looked up and pointed directly at the camera, acknowledging this recording mechanism, and yelled out, "The whole world is watching!" That was *the* dynamic moment that really woke me up. This is eventually what Abbie Hoffman and the yippies caught onto: Those that can create the biggest spectacle occupy the most television time.

**KK** It's interesting that for *Canon* you chose to focus on the Take Back the Night demonstrations. I remember those at my college. They were held at night, a time that symbolizes invisibility. I find you celebrating empowerment, and visibility, conversely, in the darkness.

**DB** It's an important area for me, you're right. *Canon: Take Back the Night* is the most direct application of my having *grown up* in Berkeley. The first Take Back the Night march was held in San Francisco, in 1978. It was against violence to women. A decade later, in 1988, I was teaching at Princeton University, which had a women's center. A lot of men on the campus put the center down, but I was very thankful that they had this place for women. Because when I went to college, I would have not have known how to reach for help. I wouldn't mention it before, but now I will: my first occurrence of sex was to be raped in college, during my sophomore year, and I had nowhere to go. And that hurt has never gone away. I felt that if I wanted to do a tape for my time at Princeton, it basically would be for the women there. The videotape of the event was shot by the students. I asked women students I knew to let me see the footage they had gathered during the 1987 Take Back the Night

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## MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

march, which was against sexual harassment toward either men or women. It was very poorly shot with a low-grade VHS camera and of course they didn't want to bring this footage in.... For them it was a very personal thing. On the recordings you could see members of the fraternities, which at Princeton were called male eating houses, come out to harass the marchers. However, I heard that the following year many men, from these same houses, came out in support of the march. But I was shocked that a university that holds such a top status in this country would have this type of environment, where male club members would still come out and say: "Who are these fucking dyke lesbians? Take back the night, take back my ass," and on and on. And I thought that I should get this imagery from the women's center to stand up on screen and make it into a cohesive statement. There was a lot of editing done for *Canon* and a lot of effects work, to tell a rather abstracted, but strongly emotive, story about what empowerment is, of revisiting and occupying the sites where occurrences of violence had occurred. That occupation was meant to create a position of safety, where the victims' stories could be told on the actual site where the events had happened.

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Dara Birnbaum, *Hostage*, 1994, partial installation view at Paula Cooper Gallery, six-channel color video with five stereo-channels, audio, interactive laser, custom-designed mounts, Plexiglas shields. Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

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**BS** We've been wondering about the piece you did for the journal *October*, where you say that a little gesture or a reaction to a disaster is already a form of empowerment.

**KK** I think your words were "counter to force, reaction empowers, giving back to the body it's elemental disposition, it's capacity for expression."

**DB** I went back into popular imagery to look at a number of disasters, portrayed through comic books and on television. I looked at many comics and anime from different countries and cultures, and at very elemental types of disasters: fire destroying; water drowning; and the reaction shots of dismay. I did work in relation to disaster even before this artist's project for *October*. For example, in *Hostage* I meant to show a terrorist position in Europe that we had not yet encountered in the United States. I just felt that it was coming, and unfortunately it did. Here in the United States, especially since the Gulf War, televised footage of these events is tightly controlled by the government. It's from a pool of *allowed* imagery. You're usually not seeing any close-up shots. Things usually remain at an abstracted distance. Here in America, you're not allowed to see the bodies of soldiers being returned home. Some psychiatrists talk against taking a "reactive" position in life, but something is to be said for allowing an observance of the "reaction" to events. It's a very human, emotional, and natural thing that occurs. Rather than the gestures in *Kiss the Girls: Make them Cry*, where the women I've isolated exaggeratedly smile, twist, or turn to look seductive and pull in the audience, in the artist's project for *October* I utilize drawings by talented animators. Their drawings represent the reaction to disaster, where all that's left is horror. You're not sure *what* the event is, but you are shown the horror that developed, which is now endemic to the way we all live.

**KK** In relation to your work *Tiananmen Square: Break-In Transmission* you described "the enormity of a power we cannot see." You're talking about the Chinese government's blockage of the media.

**DB** That was a moment where the power of broadcast television became very evident, especially when the occupation of Tiananmen Square ended in violence. Again, it felt to me to be one of television's most historically significant moments, when the Chinese government told foreign news teams, "You're no longer allowed to broadcast." Yet, I was able to virtually watch images that did eventually get out around-the-clock on cable, through unsupervised independent recordings, fax machines, and phone lines. In the installation, I repeat the moments that CBS and CNN were taken off-air. There was a big difference in the way that the two networks reacted. At the time, CNN typified cable and CBS typified broadcast television. CNN is now an entirely different entity since Time Warner bought it, but at the time it had some good newsmen. Dan Rather, as much there's a divided opinion about him, I think showed the height of his ability at that moment in his work for CBS. He had heard through his headset that the CBS reporters were recording the first images of violence. The Chinese government was trying to shut down the broadcast stations before anything could be shown. Rather stalled and kept saying to the government agents, "I'm sorry, I didn't hear you. What are you saying?" That strategic stalling enabled CBS to broadcast the first images of violence. CNN tried to meet violence with violence and push the Chinese government's agents back. As a result they were immediately shut down. And so in the installation these two moments are shown, repeatedly. There are four channels: the cessation of satellite transmission; the first eruption of violence; fax machines and other

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## MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

technology used to get images through when satellite transmission ceased; and the one that's the most emotive and maybe romantic—a song by 40 Taiwanese who sympathized with the Chinese students in Tiananmen Square. That appeared on a relatively unknown cable channel called Channel L. It was garbled, but it came through. A hidden surveillance switcher, placed within the exhibition space, constantly takes little grabs from the images that you're watching and reassembles them on a large-screen monitor, as a gesture toward the types of cuts or edits done by TV news. Maybe the same issue emerges again in the work...about being in control versus being out of control. ABC's slogan, "Eyewitness News," implies that you're seeing what's happening, whereas in reality everything has been transcribed and translated. When your eyes are focused on what is being presented by a television network, on the news item they've selected and edited for viewing, what are you missing or *not* seeing?



Dara Birnbaum, *Erwartung/Expectancy*, 1995/2001, video projection on duraclear, mounted on Plexiglas with quadrasonic sound, 96×48". Installation view, Marian Goodman Gallery, NYC. Photo: Jon Abbott, NYC. Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

**KK** We've been discussing visibility and the loss of visibility. You've used the metaphor of the forest for different purposes in various works as a symbol for the loss of visibility. You use the forest most directly in *Erwartung*, where the viewer's shadow literally becomes part of a multilayered forest of imagery. For me, you acknowledge the shadow as a place of negative projection and repression, but also introduce it as the site of expression, creativity, and empowerment. It reminds me of Pliny's story of the birth of painting existing in the shadow. A woman whose lover is dying captures his image by tracing his shadow. The shadow is the site of creativity, but also of loss. There is erotic desire that's playing into it, too.

**DB** It's strange; you're helping me see junctures in the work that I haven't necessarily observed. In part that's what we've been doing by unearthing this archive, bringing to light

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## MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

the shadow-side and the repressed-side of myself. Schoenberg's 1909 one-act opera *Erwartung* — whose libretto was written by Marie Pappenheim — was meant to express aspects of the unconscious in its atonal musical score and in its lyrics. The heroine is seeking the object of her desire, her lost lover, whom she thinks she has killed. Pappenheim had been around Freud's circle, the beginnings of recognition of the fragmentation of self and of the unconscious. I took segments from the opera and made them into 17 tableaux—a pathway for someone who is in the dark looking for light, for consciousness. When light comes, the heroine loses everything because her ability to formulate her desire can only occur in the unconscious, in darkness.

Paul Virilio related light, in this past century, to speed: "Too much speed is like too much light, it blinds." The new work that I am currently formulating, in part as a commission by S.M.A.K., is loosely based upon Richard Strauss's opera *Die Frau ohne Schatten*. His opera is about a woman who can't cast her own shadow. However, I wish to realize and bring forth the concept and perception that it is not only the personal that casts a shadow. Transcended, a shadow can also be cast by the social, societal, or even the political position and stance of a country. If we take it more as a sense of representing ourselves, as a society, it would seem quite important to ask what type of shadow are we casting right now, for example in the Iraqi and Israeli-Palestinian wars, whose very imagery we are not allowed to see?