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True confessions of a video art pioneer

How the influential artist discovered the medium by accident

By Pac Pobric (December 6, 2013)



Dara Birnbaum and her work, *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*, 1978

Dara Birnbaum's first institutional show in New York almost never happened. In 1975, the artist returned to her home town after spending a year in Florence, Italy. She found work as a waitress three nights a week and a place to live in SoHo. Rent was cheap. She paid around \$125 a month, and devoted much of her time to working on her art. She quickly found a community of artists—including Robin Winters, Willoughby Sharp and Scott and Beth B—with whom she would exhibit in alternative spaces such as apartment lofts. But commercial galleries and other institutions were not yet on the map.

“When I first started,” Birnbaum tells me over lunch, “I had no intention of going into galleries.” So they came to her. After Birnbaum had spent a couple of years in New York, a representative of Artists Space, a non-profit gallery, visited the artist in her studio as a first step towards potentially showing her work. Birnbaum had been making performance-based art partly inspired by Vito Acconci, but her visitor wasn't interested. “He looked at me and said: ‘Did something happen to you?’ He just totally didn't understand. So I was turned down.”

But Birnbaum had an ally in Suzanne Kuffler, an artist and friend with whom she had collaborated on finding places to exhibit work. Curators from Artists Space had visited Kuffler as well, and they liked her work enough to offer her a show. She accepted, but on one condition: that Birnbaum be invited as well. “All of a sudden, I had my first show without them really wanting me,” she remembers with a smile.

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Birnbaum could not have known then that she would go on to become one of the most well-respected artists of her generation. The critic Karen Rosenberg has called her “bracingly original”. Museums today welcome her work, which can be found in the collections of New York’s Museum of Modern Art and Whitney Museum of American Art, among others. It is difficult to imagine internet art without her influence. Even significantly younger artists such as Cory Arcangel acknowledge their debt to her work. “You anticipated the way people would express themselves through technology,” Arcangel told Birnbaum in 2009.

Yet a career in studio art was not always on Birnbaum’s mind. In the early 1970s, after studying architecture at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, she moved to California’s Bay Area to work as an environmental designer for Lawrence Halprin Associates. But her interests shifted quickly in her new surroundings. “Berkeley was a hotbed of political activity at the time, and I started to see art as a place to take a stand for free speech and to test First Amendment rights,” she says. She convinced her employers that further study at the San Francisco Art Institute would be beneficial for her architectural practice and she was given the green light to enrol in a painting programme, which she completed in 1973.

Birnbaum never returned to Halprin; instead, she left for Florence the following year. It was there that she was exposed in depth to a number of artists—Acconci, Dan Graham, Joan Jonas, Dennis Oppenheim—who had begun to incorporate video in their work. Each had come through the city to show at Centro Diffusione Grafica, a space run by Maria Gloria Biccocchi.

“I found video art by accident at that gallery,” Birnbaum says. “Biccocchi had accumulated some video equipment and she encouraged artists to use it.” With early mobile cameras such as the Portapak, artists were able to make work outside their studios, and were even able to develop and edit film after Biccocchi founded Art/Tapes/22, a small production centre that also became an archive. For Birnbaum, video opened up a whole new range of possibilities: montage, jump-cuts, narrative form. “There was almost a magic about it,” she fondly recalls.

Back in New York, Birnbaum realised that she was less interested in filming her own video than in borrowing it from popular culture. But finding footage was difficult. “There were no home recording units at the time, so there was no way to capture those images,” Birnbaum says. “I had to beg, borrow and steal.”

In 1978, Birnbaum made the work for which she is perhaps still best known: *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*. The footage for the piece, taken from the television show about the female superhero, was practically smuggled out of the TV studio with the help of an insider. Even later on, in preparing for *Tiananmen Square: Break-in Transmission*, from 1989-90, she had to act clandestinely. “I had a friend in the field who was a news editor—I won’t say who or what news agency—but she said she would help me get some video [of the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989] that was never broadcast. The two met in a bathroom where the tapes were quietly handed over. “Going and meeting her at the TV station and getting that footage was like buying expensive drugs.”

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Hot water

The political nature of Birnbaum's work has sometimes landed her in trouble. In 2000, she was invited by Hans Ulrich Obrist to take part in the first Seoul International Media Biennial. In June that year, talks between North and South Korea led to an agreement that would briefly reunite family members long divided after the Korean War. "I was thinking—silly me—is there any chance for a small hole to open?" I was in favour of destroying these boundaries." The motion-graphic work Birnbaum made for the show—*Taegukki*, 2000—at one point depicted the flags of the two countries side by side. Businessmen in the city were not pleased. "They demanded the work be taken down or they would withdraw their advertising," she says, and the piece was soon axed, although the artist was not informed until some months later.

There were no censorship problems last night, when the artist screened her 2011 work *Arabesque* on the 7,000 sq. ft screen at the Frank Gehry-designed New World Center concert hall. The piece, which was originally a four-channel video installation, was specifically edited to suit the single massive screen, because Birnbaum knew that she did not want to simply present a documentary film of the original show. So is the re-cut version a new work? "I don't know," Birnbaum says. "It's like a theme, or an edition."

Now the artist is shifting her attention elsewhere, and has begun work on a piece based on Vincenzo Bellini's 1831 opera "La sonnambula". Research even included a trip to Bellagio, Italy, where the artist filmed footage on Lake Como, although she admits to having some difficulty with progressing on the piece ("it has been fighting me", she says). But Birnbaum has overcome larger hurdles before. Her 40-year career is largely a tale of rising to challenges, and there is no reason to think that she will not do so again.