

ARTnews

Dara Birnbaum Talked Back to Media and Imagined New Transmissions for the Future

Lynn Hershman Leeson (October 15, 2025)



Dara Birnbaum in 2016. Photo Astrid Stawiarz/Getty Images

Experiencing **Dara Birnbaum's** work for the first time was so profound that it took my breath away and left me speechless for hours. When my voice returned, without realizing it, I went on to describe Dara's practice to friends in the hushed tones reserved for sacred matters. Dara was audacious in her explorations, and among the most influential and pioneering artists of my generation. She was one of the first artists to realize and directly confront the fact that single frames within a video could be manipulated, and that color bars could be used within her work itself. Her art was unworldly and spectral.

Dara was fearless when creating electronically based installations and often expanded the language of what was in her early years considered a nascent format. She also used it as a means to describe the underpinnings of the human condition. Her work was provocative and transcendent. Over the past four decades Dara engaged not only the aesthetics of mass media but also the subtle implications of imagery itself.

The opportunity to meet Dara in person occurred by accident decades after I became entranced by her work. We happened to be sitting at the same table in the café at the Museum of Modern Art, both waiting for our order. We began to chat about the slow service and then about art, and I mentioned that she should look up the work of Dara Birnbaum. That's when she laughed and told me her name. Had I known I was talking to the actual Dara, I would probably have been too much in awe to chat. Now, I remain grateful for that extraordinary encounter, as it marked the start of my getting to know Dara over time. Appropriately, we continued our conversations using video and media to overcome the distance between us.

Dara's vision predicted and helped cause the way media would reshape the future. For instance, her subversive early video *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* (1978–79) looped fragmented video excerpts that had been extracted from their original context in a popular TV show. Her probing, resequencing, and deconstruction brought a deeper relevance to how information is assimilated; it also underscored how remixed television information could be manipulated and transformed.

Other works of Dara's such as *Local TV News Analysis* (1980) and *MTV: Artbreak* (1987), a 30-second animation piece she made for broadcast on the widely followed music-video cable channel, deconstructed the mass media and cultural attitudes toward female protagonists, and ultimately revealed how women working in mediated environments are too often invisible, disregarded, or left to display their work outside the mainstream. Her work incorporated repeating excerpts drawn from media ranging from game shows to soap operas, and was fundamental to the eventual inclusion of women in media history. She was also unique in the way she established her "talk back" installations that invited others to participate in their completion. Through these works she pioneered interactive media.

Dara has been a major influence for generations of artists, writers, and curators—and her influence will continue in the future. I'll miss running into her and messaging with her and seeing what she would do next. She challenged the possibilities that existed in her time, and changed them for the better. Because of her vision and the art she created and shared, Dara remains ever-present and continues to reshape the world in which she lived and worked.