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Dara Birnbaum, 78, Dies; Video Was Her Medium and Her Message

As early as the 1970s, she demonstrated that mass media was fair game as artistic material, and that its power could be turned against itself.

by Will Heinrich (June 13, 2025)



The video artist Dara Birnbaum in 2023. "Television was a one-way medium, its audience tending to become passive," she said. "I wanted to show the aggressive conditioning forced upon viewers by these programs." Credit: via Marian Goodman Gallery

In 1978, turning television footage into a work of art wasn't as easy as opening up your smartphone or computer. As the artist Dara Birnbaum told *Frieze* magazine in 2022, there was no home video recording equipment, and "it was illegal to record any imagery from television, punishable by stringent mandates."

But she felt it was important to pay attention to the medium that Americans were spending, on average, nearly a third of their lives consuming. So she found access to editing equipment and to original footage smuggled out of studios by friends, most famously from the hit show "Wonder Woman."

"Television was a one-way medium, its audience tending to become passive," she later explained. "I wanted to show the aggressive conditioning forced upon viewers by these programs."

The resulting six-minute piece, "Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman," begins with 11 straight explosions, followed by the actress Lynda Carter spinning in circles under more explosions as she is transformed into the Amazon superhero of the TV show's title.



Ms. Birnbaum's "Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman" (1978) begins with 11 straight explosions, followed by Lynda Carter spinning in circles under more explosions as she transforms into the Amazon superhero of the hit TV show's title. Credit: via Marian Goodman Gallery

It was a simple change, but a profound one. By stripping these effects from their ordinary fairy-tale context, Ms. Birnbaum made it easier to see the violence and sexual objectification they transmitted, along with their nominal story. Perhaps more important, she also demonstrated — to a whole cohort of later artists, including Cory Arcangel and Martine Syms — that mass media was fair game as artistic material, and that its power could, if only temporarily or in principle, be turned against itself.

Ms. Birnbaum died in a Manhattan hospital on May 2. She was 78. Her brother and only immediate survivor, Robert Birnbaum, a physician scientist, said the cause was metastatic endometrial cancer.

Ms. Birnbaum also made more introspective work, like the three-part video series "Damnation of Faust," a haunting meditation on the Faust myth shot in Lower Manhattan, as well as elegantly designed installations to house her videos and inventive drawings.

But she never lost her interest in the moving image, or in coercion and control — though those interests converged in different ways as her work became less focused on the dangers of video than on its potential to reveal other dangers.

Her 1990 piece "Tiananmen Square: Break-In Transmission" used found footage and a claustrophobic installation of multiple monitors to consider both the previous year's protests in Tiananmen Square in Beijing and the Chinese government's suppression of information about them. The six-channel installation "Psalm 29(30)," made after Ms. Birnbaum had recovered from a grave illness in 2014, juxtaposed views of Lake Como, in Italy — shot while she was a resident at the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Center there — with images of the Syrian civil war.



Ms. Birnbaum's 1990 piece "Tiananmen Square: Break-In Transmission" used found footage and a claustrophobic installation of multiple monitors to consider both the previous year's protests in Beijing and the Chinese government's suppression of information about them. Credit: Dara Birnbaum, via Marian Goodman Gallery

Dara Nan Birnbaum was born in New York City on Oct. 29, 1946, to Mary (Sochotliff) Birnbaum, a medical technician turned homemaker, and Philip Birnbaum, a New York architect of residential buildings known for the efficiency of his apartment layouts.

After graduating early from Forest Hills High School in Queens, Ms. Birnbaum enrolled at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh as a pre-med student, but she switched to architecture before long. After earning her bachelor's degree in architecture in 1969, she moved to San Francisco to work for Lawrence Halprin & Associates. When an oil crisis hit and business slowed down, she enrolled in the San Francisco Art Institute, where she earned a B.F.A. in 1973.

The next year, she moved to Florence, Italy, where she took classes at the Accademia di Belle Arti — and had an encounter that changed her life.

Stopping one night to look at a pair of lithographs in the windows of a gallery called Centro Diffusione Grafica (later known as art/tapes/22), Ms. Birnbaum noticed a group of people in the back huddled around a television set. When they beckoned her to join them, she found that they were watching neither the news nor a soap opera but a video art piece by Allan Kaprow.

Through the gallery, she met the artist Vito Acconci and others. With their encouragement, she returned to New York and its vibrant art scene, though not specifically to its galleries.

"I initially avoided galleries like the plague," she told Mr. Arcangel when he interviewed her for Artforum in 2009. "I didn't want to translate popular imagery from television and film into painting and photography. I wanted to use video on video; I wanted to use television on television."

Adding a reference to a popular East Village video store, she said, "It was a populist form, and our great hope was to do something that made it to Kim's Video." (Much of her work has been distributed instead by the media-art nonprofit Electronic Arts Intermix.)



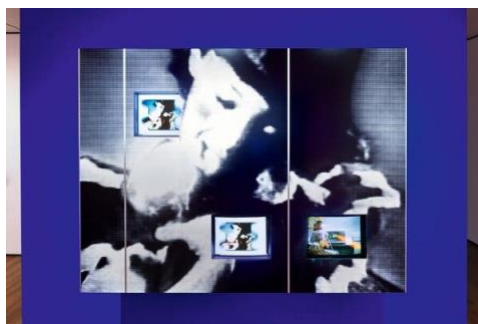
Ms. Birnbaum's earliest video works were philosophically tinged experiments with the medium like the black-and-white "Mirroring" (1975), in which Ms. Birnbaum, captured in front of a dull gray backdrop, seems to go in and out of focus as she approaches the camera. Credit: Dara Birnbaum, via Marian Goodman Gallery

Her earliest video works were philosophically tinged experiments with the medium like the black-and-white "Mirroring" (1975), in which Ms. Birnbaum, captured in front of a dull gray backdrop, seems to go in and out of focus as she approaches the camera. In fact, the camera is trained on a mirror, as is revealed when the artist doubles herself by slipping in front of the lens.

But by 1978, she had begun to work with appropriated material — first with an installation featuring footage from "Laverne & Shirley," then in "Technology/Transformation" and later with images borrowed from "Hollywood Squares" in "PM Magazine," a mash-up of entertainment news and commercials for Wang computers.



Ms. Birnbaum's work with appropriated material included "Kiss the Girls: Make Them Cry" (1979). Credit: via Marian Goodman Gallery



Ms. Birnbaum's "PM Magazine" (1982) was a mash-up of entertainment news and commercials for computers. Credit: via Marian Goodman Gallery

Within a few years, Ms. Birnbaum was showing at galleries and museums, including the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum, beginning with its New American Filmmakers series in 1984 and its Biennial in 1985. Her work also appeared at film festivals around the world, including several editions of Documenta, in Kassel, Germany, beginning in 1982, when she was the only video artist in Documenta VII.

She would eventually have retrospectives in Tokyo; Milan; Vienna; Porto, Portugal; and Ghent, Belgium, as well at the Hessel Museum of Art in Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y., and the Miller Institute for Contemporary Art in Pittsburgh.

In 2017, Carnegie Mellon's School of Art created the Birnbaum Award in her honor.

Of all her edits and remixes, Ms. Birnbaum's most subversive response to mass media may have been simply to turn down its volume.

"Everything seems to be changing and failing and falling out from under us," she told the curator Lauren Cornell in a 2016 interview with ARTnews. "So a kind of numbness has developed, and that's why some art attempts to yell so hard at its viewers. But if one comes from a place of solemnity and from a whisper, in a society that's constantly yelling, maybe it's a strong whisper that can best be heard and then matched with full integrity."