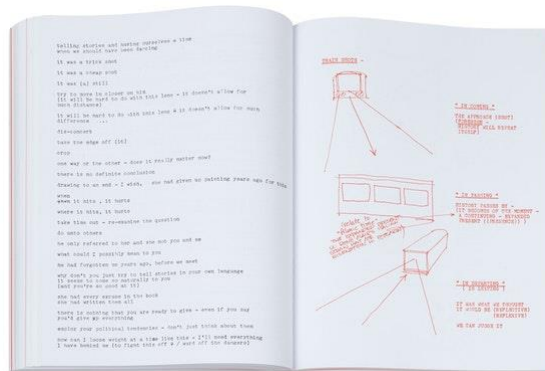




Dara Birnbaum's Note(s): Work(ing) Process(es) Re: Concerns (That Take On/Deal With)

Its complexity and resolute physical presence dovetail with the concerns of the artist's body of work, linking means and ends, and constitute a performance in itself.

by Jennie Waldow



Courtesy of Primary Information.

Dara Birnbaum's *Note(s): Work(ing) Process(es) Re: Concerns (That Take On/Deal With)* begins with an epigraph paraphrasing Marx: "End statements have their origin in non-rational processes and are therefore not subject to rational scrutiny. Means, however, can be scrutinized from the perspectives of their ends and are consequently subject to rational evaluation." Birnbaum, a pioneer of video art, allows such means to be evaluated through this comprehensive and occasionally confounding collection, a reproduction of a single handmade compilation produced for the 1977 Franklin Furnace exhibition *Notebooks, Workbooks, Scripts, and Scores*. Organized by Mayra Levy, the show was meant to give "an inside look at the working processes of performance artists," according to Jacki Apple's 2005 history of Franklin Furnace in *TDR*. Birnbaum provides this look through preparatory materials, notes, and documentation of selected film, performance, and installation works from 1975 to 1977, ensconced within a pleasantly tactile red vinyl cover; the Primary Information publication is also accompanied by Alex Kitnick's concise introduction. Materially detached from Birnbaum's finished products, her working documents chart the theoretical motivations behind each piece, along with the novel technical solutions she devised to translate thorny concepts into external space. While this is not a publication for the casual reader, its complexity and resolute physical presence dovetail with the concerns of Birnbaum's body of work, linking means and ends.

Born in New York in 1946, Birnbaum is known for works such as *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* (1978–1979), *Kiss the Girls: Make Them Cry* (1979), and *PM Magazine* (1982), which scrambled and re-contextualized television broadcasts to expose gendered and consumerist messages. In addition

to a painting degree from the San Francisco Art Institute, she also received a BA from Carnegie Mellon (where she was the youngest woman to ever enter the architectural program), and worked for a time in the San Francisco architectural firm Lawrence Halprin & Associates. “That was great, but architectural planning always seemed to come down to economics and politics. I started drifting towards the arts,” she recalled to Alex Newberger in a 2018 *ArtNews* profile. After a year in Florence, Italy, where she encountered early video-editing technology, she returned to New York. It was during this period that she began making pieces that combined film, performance, and installation, often with a keen awareness of architectural space and its effect on power relations.

Her training comes across clearly in elegantly dashed-off architectural drawings and storyboards in the book, starting with *Back Piece* (1975). Through typewritten statements, sketches, photographs, and a fold-out reproduction of a facsimiled contact sheet (the bottom left corner dog-eared to indicate to readers that it should be unfurled), Birnbaum’s process and intent become evident: organizing various projections and audio within a particular, constricted physical space, in order to impart a psychological sense of being caught between the past and the present. The documentary photographs, as typical of reproduced items from this period, are hazy, making it difficult to fully understand the spatial organization of the piece through the sketches and complex written descriptions alone. Compounding the sense of disorientation, several of Birnbaum’s horizontally-oriented notes are reproduced facing leftward, with the writing towards the spine of the book. This unusual positioning frustrated me until I realized that this was likely a purposeful effect, designed to make the reader more aware of their bodily and optical relation to the book, in the same manner as many of Birnbaum’s early works.

Other sections chronicle pieces that incorporated film, video, and performance in a more direct fashion, including *Mirroring* (1975), *Pivot: Turning Around Superstitions* (1976), and *Liberty: A Dozen or So Views* (1976). The materials related to *Attack Piece* (1975) are a particular highlight, crisply relaying the parameters and psychological underpinnings of the work. Birnbaum, in the role of “the defender,” was armed with a 35mm still camera and “attacked” (or intrusively approached) by friends, one at a time, who filmed the encounters with a Super-8 film camera. Birnbaum documented the contrasting methods of approach by “attackers” Dan Graham, Ian Murray, Cyne Cobb, Christina Ritchie, and David Askevold, as well as her own feelings during the exercise, in detailed drawings and notes humorously titled “Reflections Upon Being Attacked by Your Friends.”

The book’s final section, “Concerns (That Take On/Deal With) Inter•Process(es) Inter•Play(s)” contains increasingly poetic materials, with typewritten language accumulating in rhythmic fashion in the notes for *Relationship Perspectives: Perspective Relationships* (1976–1977) and *America: Land of Contrasts (A Day of Awakening)* (1976–1977). (3) *Three Works in Progress*, the last piece, collects schematics and notes related to several media, including film projection, Super-8 loops, and slides, forecasting works to come. Like several other portions of the book, it is elliptical and fragmented, showing the process that led up to works that reside beyond the form of the page. For readers with some previous knowledge of Birnbaum’s body of work, *Note(s): Work(ing) Process(es) Re: Concerns (That Take On/Deal With)* sheds light upon the artist’s meticulous translation of complex interpersonal dynamics into spatial, temporal experiences. This combination of lucid documents and more oblique, personal fragments forms a compilation that teeters between the public and private realms in a self-conscious fashion. That Birnbaum eventually decided to publish these materials constitutes a performance in itself, making visible her role as “artist.”